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BONHAM



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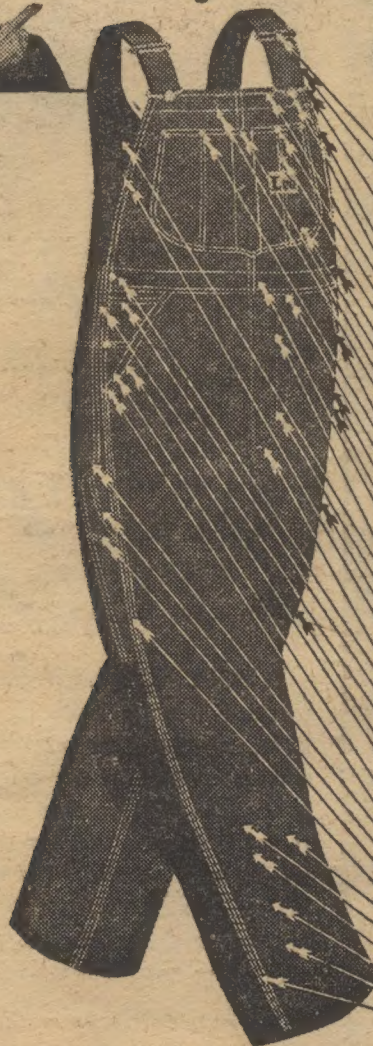
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Unfortunately, Jimmy's neighbors did not take kindly to his ambition. They banded together and raided his herd, capturing Jimmy. There wasn't a man in the posse who didn't find several dozen of his own steers in Jimmy's herd and their indignation knew no bounds. Someone threw his rope over a cottonwood limb. Jimmy's neck was put in the noose and he was asked if he had any last request.

"Yes," said Jimmy. "If I must die for stealing I'd like to feel that I've been hung by an honest man. Whichever one of you deep in his heart *knows* that he has

(Continued on page 8)

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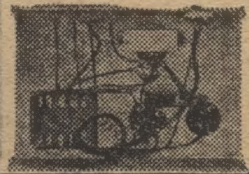
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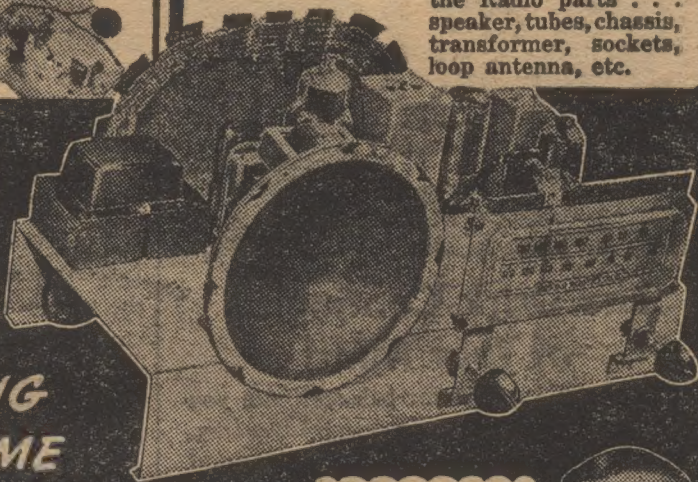


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(Continued from page 6)

never stolen his neighbor's cattle, let him yank the rope and I'll die in peace."

There was an awkward silence as each man thought of certain secret events in his early life. Finally, the leader said, "All right, Jimmy. You win." The rope was removed and the posse stood watching Jimmy riding north, out of the country.

THE average Western outlaw did his robbing and killing in a plain, business-like way. It was not so in California, where the bandits were more colorful. True to their Spanish tradition the bandit would present his victim with a courtly bow after lifting his purse, and if a pretty girl were present he would surely kiss her.

Such a band was led by a Mexican known as Captain Saneti. While a ball was in progress in a villa on the outskirts of Los Angeles Saneti's men came through the windows and held everyone up. They stole a few watches and other trinkets and spent the rest of the evening dancing with the girls while their escorts, hands high in the air, glared. A reward of one thousand five hundred dollars was put on Saneti's head, dead or alive.

That was a small fortune then and Saneti's lieutenant, a man named Moreno, found he couldn't resist. He stuck a knife into his leader's back and with the body draped across his saddle, rode into Los Angeles to claim the reward. Moreno told a pitiful story of being taken prisoner by Saneti and of having killed his captor while escaping. The reward was paid.

Moreno used his blood money for liquor, principally. In a few months he was as poor as he was before killing his captain. He tried to pawn a watch stolen at the ball, which the outlaws had crashed so picturesquely. The watch was identified by the pawn broker, who knew its original owner, and Moreno, still groggy with alcohol, was quickly strung up.



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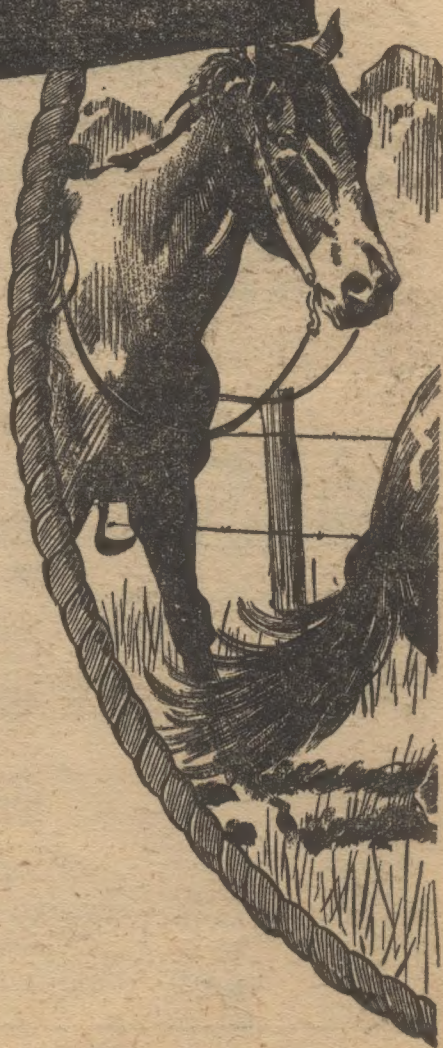
CHAPTER ONE

Devil's Sidekick

IT HAD NOT stopped raining since they locked the cell door behind Clay Cantrell, and that had been three weeks ago. He was from the eastern part of the state, where it was as dry as any county in Texas, and the continual splattering of rainwater down the roof-gutters had him touring up and down like an animal. Occasionally it would let up for an hour or two, the sun weakly peering through tatters in the clouds to see whether there was any use shining on that sodden valley, and people would stop on the street and shake hands and congratulate each other on the fine weather they were having. In time, Clay Cantrell reckoned, a man must get used to living like a frog. Unfortunately, they were going to hang him before he had an opportunity to achieve this.

During one of these lulls, Big Buck, the jailer,

*"I'm takin' my last trail, mister, where guns make the music
an' a hangrope the dance . . . an' where there's no difference
between the good an' the dead!"*



**By FRANK
BONHAM**



The horse was a creature out of a nightmare, looming above him with hoofs raised.

brought another prisoner in and shoved him into the cell across from Clay's. The jailer was a gigantic, unambitious man with a slouching mind and a cruelty so natural that it was hardly malicious. He would hold up his own dinner to let the prisoners' food chill thoroughly before bringing it down the brief stone corridor. He would sit in the office in front strumming a guitar and singing, *The Pardon Came Too Late*.

He shoved the bolt home, snapped the padlock, and said to Clay, "Ain't this beautiful weather? We'll have two months of this yit before the rain begins."

Clay said, "It must make a man like you just wish he was alive."

Big Buck soured and rammed the key into the padlock of Clay's cell, as if to come in and give him a thrashing. The prisoner was twenty-two, light-built but tough as a boot sole, and about all he prayed for these days was that Big Buck would try it some time.

"You sound like a fella don't want any dinner," the jailer said menacingly.

"After that lunch, I feel like it."

"Well, just watch yourself or you'll get your wish."

He went back down the hall and Clay and the new man looked at each other through the strap-iron grilles set like narrow windows in the upper parts of their doors. What Clay saw was a big, pallid face with dark-ringed eyes, a handsome face, though somewhat rutted with high living. The man's hair was black as iron, with glints of white like the guard-hairs of a silvertip grizzly. He wore a wide, prosperous-looking mustache.

He grinned at Clay and said, "Smoke?" He reached through the grille and thrust his arm as far out as he could, holding a sack of tobacco. By the same device Clay was able to receive the tobacco. He had not smoked since they jailed him. On occasion, Big Buck would stand in the hall letting his tobacco smoke torment him,

and now and then he would drop a cigarette butt beside the door.

"Thanks!" Clay began to roll a smoke.

"What have they got you in here for, son?" the man asked.

Clay's eyes snapped up. He was a lean young fellow with hard brown features and a truculent cut to his mouth. All his training had been to take care of himself and leave the other fellow alone.

He said, "Bad company."

The other man laughed. "My name's Haribson. Call me Key. I'm in for gambling."

"There's no law against that."

"Only if you win. I drummed up a little race and took a hop farmer for a thousand dollars. Maybe you can see my horse yonder in the corral. He looks pretty sorry between the traces of a buggy; but I put those galls on his shoulders with acid. He looks a lot better under a saddle. It just happened this farmer knew the marshal."

"They can't jail you for that!"

Harbison shrugged. "I'll likely be out before it comes to trial."

"Wouldn't count on that. The judge is coming tomorrow. This town don't have any judge or lawyers. The judge brings the whole kit-and-biling. They say the public defender throws the case unless you can pay him."

Harbison clucked. "So you figure you'll spend some more time behind the cold gray walls, eh?"

"No."

Harbison pursed his lips. "Killin', eh?"

"Somebody else's killin'." Clay was immediately sorry he had said it. Approximately the first thing he had learned in his life was to waste no time drumming up sympathy. Take the breaks the way they come, and extract what revenge you could later.

But Key Haribson's expression was one of genuine sympathy. "One of those," he said.

"One of those. Over a buck Indian, at

that." He had not talked to anyone since the marshal and Big Buck roughed him up for the truth and got the same story until he fell unconscious. But something in him hungered for vindication, because murder was something pretty grim, even to Clay Cantrell.

"I'd teamed up with a fellow named Shank to go over across the mountains and cut wild hay on contract. These two Yamhill bucks caught up with us and tried to take Shank's horse. They claimed he'd stole it." He shrugged. "Maybe he did. But there was a scrap, and Shank killed one of them. The other took off. Shank and I split up. The next day they arrested me for the killing."

Through talking, he went over and lay on his bunk and heard the rain commence again.

THE next time they talked was after dinner.

"Tomorrow," Harbison mused. "That don't give you much time. Pretty sure they'll hang it on you, are you?"

"Unless I find a hundred bucks in my boot for the public defender. And it wasn't there last time I looked. Say," he said, "you want a good horse? I'd rather you had it than any of these johnnies."

As much as anything, it was an excuse to talk about his horse. He told how he'd bought it with money he made breaking horses last year, how he'd trained it to rope and cut cattle and the way it shone like greased gold after he'd been over it with the dandy brush. "The best quarter-horse in Oregon. A bayo coyote."

"That's fine, but I think you ought to keep him." Harbison's dark, earthy face wrinkled with amusement. "What's keeping your pants up?"

"I don't get it. A snakeskin belt," Clay grunted.

"Good!" The gambler pressed his cheek against the strap-iron bars so that he could see the corridor. "Listen. I've still got

that thousand on me. If they search me again, they'll be sure to find it. Now, I'm only in on a misdemeanor, so I'd be willing to stand trial and pay up, but for that money. I'd like to get out of here, Clay."

Clay's heart thudded. He'd thought of it times a-many, but the door was stout, the walls were stone, and Big Buck packed a gun. "Got any ideas?"

Harbison began to talk swiftly. "I hear him coming! This will be for the last time tonight, so it's got to be now or not at all. Take your belt off. When I get his attention, loop it over his head and cinch up quick! Leave the rest to me."

"But he packs a mean-looking Colt!"

"Chokin' men," said Harbison, "don't think about their guns."

The whole thing was rushing at Clay so fast that he felt giddy. He heard Big Buck coming along, whistling through his teeth. He tried to summon logic to his help. He had nothing to lose, all to win. In a trial, he'd be convicted in two hours. He reached down and unfastened the silver buckle of his belt.

Big Buck stopped and blew smoke into Clay's cell, grinning. Clay sat on the bunk with his head in his hands. He heard Harbison's drawl.

"Jailer, I'd give all the money I'm holding, here, for a pint of whiskey."

Big Buck's boots scraped on the stone floor. Clay lunged up from the cot, pressed to the bars and saw the broad back, the thick neck, the big ears that protruded like batwing chaps. Silently he worked the belt through the bars. One instant he hesitated, measuring. Then he tossed the loop, saw it fall clean as a corral hoolihan, and dragged it in. Big Buck made a choking sound. Clay held him there and reached out to dig his fingers into the jailer's windpipe.

Harbison's arm reached through the grill. "The keys!"

Big Buck, threshing helplessly, his face turgid, hadn't sense enough to go for his

gun, but he was able to obey a command. He shoved the big key ring at the gambler. Harbison reached down and unlocked his cell. He slipped out and slugged Big Buck cleanly on the point of the chin. Clay let him fall. Harbison unlocked Clay's cell.

Standing there a moment, both panting, both too keyed up to know which way to jump, they stared down at the man. Clay recovered and took his belt from the fat throat. Harbison began to talk. Seen up close, he was a massive, rangily built man whose clothes were of well-cut gray cloth.

"Best I tied him, Clay. We'll have all night, if he don't give the alarm. Saddle the horse while I fix for him."

Clay ducked back for his clothes, jammed them into his warbag and donned his slicker. He loped up the hall, but paused to glance into the jailer's office. It was empty. Clay secured his gun from the drawer, belted it on, and stepped back into the hall. Yonder, Harbison was fitting the key back into the lock of his own door. It was an odd thing, but men in tight spots did odd things. Clay ducked out into the rain.

The horses were in the small jail barn. It rained so much in this coastal country you couldn't all-weather a horse unless you wanted him coming down with the epizootic. Clay saddled his pony and was hoisting Harbison's saddle onto his big chestnut bay when he heard a sound within the jail, somewhere between a door-slam and a gunshot. It hung him momentarily on a peg of shock. Big Buck had shot Key!

But an instant later, the gambler came out the door and lunged through the rain to the barn. "Damn, crazy churn-head!" he panted. "I didn't take his gun, and the fool drug it out somehow after I'd tied him and pulled the trigger. Shot a hole as big as a saucer in his leg!"

The rain had drowned the noise as it drowned everything else, and they heard

nothing but its unremitting splatter as they exited through the barn door onto an alley. They rode quietly out of town. But Clay Cantrell left the remainder of his youth in Red Barn, if there had been any left. With the jailer wounded, maybe dead, he was in it for fair. He was one, to all intents and purposes, with Billy Bonney, Joaquin Murieta, and all the others who had lived out their lives on dark and bloody ground.

THERE were many roads in and out of Red Barn, for it was a crossroads community catering to hop farmers, dairymen and prune growers in this narrow valley between the Coast Range and the Cascades. Over east was the cattle country, the high desert, to which they were heading without even discussing it. There was as little chance of their being successfully trailed as there was of leaving tracks in a sponge. The sposhy road winding into the Cascade Mountains was greasy with mud.

They stopped at dawn to rest their ponies. Clay had stolen a small bag of oats and a morral from the jail barn. He was a stickler for proper feeding of an animal, and saw to it that his horse drank before it ate, and that it had a quart of oats before it went to cropping the washy meadow grass. He had seen good ponies ruined by stuffing themselves on grass. There was spiritual regeneration in running his hands over the buckskin's wet hide, in tending it and dreaming old dreams.

They avoided the stage road. This meant riding narrow horse trails where wet leaves of maple and elder slapped their faces and they had a hundred branches to ford. The second night they climbed out of the clouds. In the sunset, turning his face hungrily to the sun, Clay felt like some pallid flower trying to open up. They had bought food at a crossroads store and now fried saddle-blanket pancakes to go with their sardines. Key Harbison tossed a rig into the blue enamel cof-

fee pot; when it floated he announced it was strong enough to be fit.

The dryness and the campfire beside which, in the stony embrace of some black lava rocks, they began to dry their clothing, drew them together. "What do you figger to do?" Key asked.

Clay examined a chunk of pancake on his knife-point. "Keep moving. What else?"

Key grunted. "This is Oregon, Clay. You could pitch your tent right here, and like as not nobody'd ever know, ten mile from Red Barn, that you were wanted. I'm stopping at Cayuse for a while."

"Where's that?"

"On a river just across the hump and about fifteen miles east. Cattle and lumber country. I'm looking for a feller."

Clay's sense of pioneer ethics precluded his asking why. But Harbison was wound up on coffee and hot food and kept talking.

"I've never been a man for revenge. It's like the habit of drinking corrosive sublimate . . . sooner or later it's going to eat you out. Some fellows would call this revenge, I expect, but I call it business. I'm going to buy a cattle ranch, Clay, and sell it inside a week's time."

Clay smiled. "You don't need a foreman, do you?"

Harbison finished eating and meticulously wiped his mouth on his handkerchief. "I'll take your application. You can almost count on the job. Clay," he said bluntly, "I'm just out of prison."

"I know. Your face is yellow as cham-ois. That either means you come from Seattle or you've done time."

"This man I'm looking for was supposed to have gone up with me. But I kept still and he stayed out. It was a timber claim proposition. Everybody, including half the congressman in Washington, was in on one or another. I sent the dummy entrymen over from Portland, he settled them on phoney claims, and they paid him

out of what I gave them for the land. After the trouble, I promised to keep him out of it, if he'd agree to square it with me when I got out.

"I wrote to him last month. He wrote back that he was surprised to hear from me, and who the hell was I, and don't give him any talk about cutting in on anything."

Clay made no comment. He let Key frown on through his thoughts.

"But I think he's going to pay up and like it. I put in five years behind bars. I'm on probation now. That's another reason I wanted out of that pokey. His name's Moss Tolbeck. Mr. Tolbeck is going to cut me in on a fifty-fifty partnership, and then I'm going to sell it back to him for cash, if he's got it, or sell out to somebody else if he ain't. You said you'd like to be my ramrod. Do you mean that?"

"For a week?"

"For a hundred and fifty dollars. I can't get into this by name, because they'd jug me again in no time. I need a rep. The name of Clay Cantrell wouldn't mean anything to anybody over there. How about it, Clay?"

There was a whang of shadiness about it that flagged Clay down. He ground on it a while. After all, he owed Harbison something for keeping his neck out of a noose. And it couldn't add much to the charges against him even if it turned out to be shadier than Key let on. "All right," he said.

Harbison surprised him by producing three fifties and paying him right then. It was funny the way that money seemed to add immediately to his own regard of himself. He felt more respectable than five minutes before, when he was poor—but honest.

They topped the high granite backbone of the range in the windy and frost-blasted area where it was winter, though it was still early fall below. They skirted a dozen lakes and picked a delicate way through vast black fields of lava where a fall would

have torn the hide right off a man or a horse. The timber was thick up there, yellow pine and fir contesting for space, but farther down it gave way to ragged jackpine stands and merged into the juniper and bunchgrass that lasted for a hundred miles.

Cattle grazed on the stiffly-rustling grasses. The Cayuse River brawled along through clean rocky banks almost free of soapholes and swamps. Clay's stockman's eye went over the cattle like a horse-trader's hands.

"Look at those steers!" he told Key. "Fleshed out like a Barbary Coast dancehall girl! Man, this is cattle country."

Harbison exhibited no great interest, but grinned and said, "Those are some of our cattle, Clay. This is Tolbeck's summer range. He winters them on the desert."

CLAY CANTRELL had thought himself beyond yearning. He had had his yearns as a kid, and had them knocked out of him. First it was to be a cattlemen; then to be a ramrod on a big east Oregon spread. Then it was to work as a top hand on a Hereford ranch, and lately he was willing to take anything that came along. But a kind of dizziness beset him when he heard Harbison say, "Those are some of our cattle, Clay."

It released all the bottled-up, crazy dreams of being his own man in a world of cattle and horses, where he figured out for himself how he wanted to run his steers and break his horses, and didn't have some range boss parroting things handed down to him from an earlier range boss.

They neared a town. The river kinked like a snake at this point and the steep columnar cliffs backed off into meadows; it was the only wagon-crossing in fifty miles. Clay had noticed rafts and stringers of logs coming down the stream, and now they came upon a small lumber mill above a roiled mill pond. It was a small, noisy, fuming affair, but seemed to turn out a

sizable amount of lumber, from the stacks along the short-line railroad which ran north out of Cayuse. Bucksaws had sheared off all the larger timber within several miles of town, leaving sage, juniper and jackpine.

The main street of Cayuse was wide and had been strewn with reddish lava cinders to hold down the dust and mud. It made a crisp sound under the ponies' hoofs as they rode along. Lava was the basic ingredient of this central Oregon country. They built the mountains out of it, some of the buildings, and collected the cinders to spread on the streets. Key Harbison looked like a man who knew where he was going. His thick-necked, iron-gray head kept turning as he studied this building and that, like a man returning after a long time to check the old landmarks. And once he did something which gave Clay a slight jolt.

Jogging along with the reins held lightly, he stretched his right arm as if to work out a kink. But Clay, riding on his left, saw something blunt and shiny and double-barreled drop into his palm for an instant. It was a little nickeled sleeve-gun; an instant later it snapped up out of sight again. Key did not appear conscious of having done it. He was like a gambler horsing a four-bit piece across his knuckles for practice.

There was a stout log bridge crossing the river to the mill. Harbison halted here and stared at the smoking, clanking structure. A long plank sign ran half the length of the ridgepole: SULLIVAN LUMBER COMPANY.

"Sullivan!" exclaimed Harbison. "Clay, let's run over there a minute."

They skirted the pond, dirty-green and crammed with logs and a sodden flotsam of bark. A bull-chain drew logs up a trough into the clamor of the mill. The mill was merely a roof set on spindly uprights to house the machinery. They left their horses among a random encampment

of wagons and climbed to the cutting floor, Harbison leading with a hunting-dog eagerness. The headlong dissonance of the sawmill enfolded them. There were the artillery-blasts of the steam shotgun, the hiss of a saw and the rumble of the carriage grinding down the floor. Despite the unsided walls, it was hot and steamy, smelling of sour lumber and heated grease.

A workman came up and shouted a question at them, and Harbison roared back. "Where's the boss?"

The man indicated a room partitioned from the mill by unfinished slabs. Key banged on the door. Without waiting, he thrust it open.

Clay heard a man say, "Key! You old son of a coyote!" Harbison strode in. When Clay entered, Key and a man behind a desk were shaking hands. Both were grinning like fools and pumping their arms up and down; but Clay, suspicious always of sentiment, caught an air of joshing in their manner. They were like a couple of men going through an act they had rehearsed so long they had gone stale on it.

"Clay," Harbison said, "I want you to meet an old *compadre* of mine, Webb Sullivan. Webb and I used to cut notches on the same hell-stick."

The men shook hands. Sullivan was a shirt-sleeved bearish man with a bald head which looked hard as ivory; it was garlanded with curly black hair, and his brows were level and dark. He had the look of a good-natured, hard-hitting ruffian, one who would fight for the love of it. He wore store teeth too white to fool anyone, but showed that he didn't worry over them by grinning broadly.

"Make yourself at home, Clay," he said cordially, as if Clay might like to rip out a two-by-twelve or something.

Clay started to roll a cigarette, but Sullivan shook his head and tossed him a block of eating tobacco. "This thing's burned down twice in the last four years,"

he said. "I've got all my men eating their tobacco instead of smoking it, now, and I'm making out better."

Clay rejected the plug. Harbison and Webb Sullivan did a lot of pointless talking about this and that girl and this and that scrap, and then Harbison said the first significant thing in half an hour.

"How are you fixed for timber leases?"

Sullivan dug in his ear with his forefinger. "You know this game. You've never got enough leases. Tell the truth, I'm logging out sticks I wouldn't have tied to a dog last year. I thought you liquidated all your leases, Key," he said.

Harbison said, "I'm expecting to have control of a pretty nice cut of yellow pine before long. I may want to turn it over fast after I make it."

"Short haul?" Sullivan asked.

"Like hauling it across the street."

"There's only one grove that close that I can think of," Sullivan smiled.

Clay's patience frazzled out. "Will you fellas quit reading your lines and say it flat out?" he demanded. "I've seen better plays in country schools. You're talking about Tolbeck's ranch. All right, make your terms, unless you've already done that by letter, too."

Both men stared at him. The statement seemed to be in the worst of taste. "Why, Clay—" Key began, smiling in a rueful and puzzled way.

"Oh, hell," Clay said. "Nail it down and I'll meet you outside."

He went out. It bothered him that Harbison wanted to appear so open about everything, but tried to run a whizzer like this on him. A fool could have seen that they had either talked about this or been writing letters about it for a year.

After ten minutes, Harbison emerged and they rode back across the bridge. He did not refer to Clay's speech. He said, "I think I can unload my half of this ranch to Webb Sullivan. He's a lumberman instead of a rancher, but that country

is more for logging than for raising beef, anyhow."

"If he logs it, it won't be fit for anything for ten years. I saw stretches back there where they'd cut the trees and then burned off the underbrush and grass to make it easier to work. He's the last one I'd sell to."

Harbison said blandly, "We may not have time to scout around much."

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet Brand

THEY rode along. The vista at the far end of the street was of hills steeped with pines, the bunchgrass gray and yellow in the open spaces. There was a pinch of fall in the air and an odor of burning pine from the mill. Clay liked the feel of the town.

There were seven saloons, a couple of general stores, a stockmen's supply house, a big pine-barked hotel and several stables. They stopped at a saloon called the Ponderosa Bar. Only a few ponies were at the rack, manes and tails streaming in the cold wind. A wagon was at the front of a store next to it. Harbison stared at a device burned into the side of the tail-gate wagon. Clay followed his glance and saw merely a Bar-L-Y blazed into it, the way some ranchers burned their brands into everything they owned, including a couple of verified cases of branded wives. Then he recalled seeing the same brand on the steers up the river.

Harbison snapped his fingers like a man who has just rolled a natural. "Tolbeck's in!" he said. "This is handy, Clay. Right handy to lawyers and everything." He thought a moment. "You don't look much like a stockman in that caved-in Stetson and dirty shirt. Take some of that hundred and fifty and get an outfit. Still with me?" he asked crisply.

"Up to here," grinned Clay. The grin

went about as deep as his guns. He was ready to return the money right now, before he got sucked in any deeper.

"Okay. Moss will be in the Ponderosa, if I know him. You hang around out here after you get fixed up. We'll be out."

It was dim inside the mercantile, and Clay could see himself mirrored in the window as he entered. Tall, bony, long-armed, and wearing the hat Big Buck must have sat on as a pillow while it was in his keeping. There was a hungry look to his features which good food would dismiss. But the hungry look in his eyes could only have been eased by feeding and pampering a kid named Clay Cantrell who had died fifteen years ago.

Women were buying yardage and household truck on the left side of the store. A dim corner in back was given over to men's haberdashery. A clerk took him in charge. He tried on several hats. Clay noticed that the store fell silent as soon as the man commenced querying him as to his wherefroms and wheretos.

"Why, I'm just over from the Snake country," he said. "I'm looking for a piece of land and some cattle."

"Sell out over there?"

"That's right."

He picked a black Stetson with the front sloped and creased, and began pawing over shirts. A girl at the yardage counter behind him said, "The fawn one with the raw edge was much nicer."

He turned and saw her. She was ash blonde and blue-eyed. She wore a blouse and skirt of material that reminded him of the kind of striped candy bags you got at carnivals, but sobered somewhat by a black lace collar. She was pretty and shapely and a love of fun brimmed in her eyes; she was a fragment of many of Clay's dreams. The woman with her was about fifty, matronly and gray but, at the moment, shocked.

"Jennie!" she said sharply.

Clay laid the shirt down. "Why was it

better?" he said to her with a half-smile.

"Because brown's your color. And black always makes me think of prisons and things. And it picks up dust, too. It gets dusty here sometimes, you'll find." She began to look a little abashed at what she had done, and glanced down at the bolt end she was holding. Clay was looking her over almost as appraisingly as he would have a horse.

He turned and said, "Let's see that raw-edged one again." He tried it on and looked at himself from several angles. It was flat-crowned, of good fur felt. "You know," he said, "I think you're right. I'll take this one."

He looked back, but she had turned to the counter and the back of her neck was pink.

Inspired, Clay bought tan pants, a green-plaid shirt and a pony-skin vest. He went into the storeroom to put them on. They took a big bite out of his money, but when he came out he felt like a real cattleman. A man had joined the girl and the older woman. They were talking low and earnestly, and suddenly they abandoned their shopping and all went outside. Clay paid for his purchases, bought some smoking tobacco and drifted out after them.

Harbison was already on the walk, leaning against the bark front of the saloon and picking his teeth. He winked at Clay. The girl and woman were getting into the wagon, uttering protests. The older man was short and solid, wore a gray General Lee beard cut so close it was hardly more than stubble, and had a look on his face like a bulldogger about to cross the foul line after a notoriously bad steer.

Clay heard him say, "Rose, I don't need any advice. Jennie, you shut up and sit down. Go on home. I'll be along directly."

The older woman took the lines he crowded into her hands and drove away. Tolbeck turned back to Harbison; Har-

bison signaled Clay. As he joined them, he saw the girl glance back, recognize him, and turn quickly away. Key gestured with his cigar.

"Moss, this is Clay Cantrell, the stockman I represent." They stared at each other, but Tolbeck ignored Clay's hand and Clay took it back and wiped his palm on the flare of his chaps. "Who's your lawyer?" Harbison asked.

"Hyatt. Over the bank."

"Fine. We'll go to Sigler. I saw his name on a window. I guess we ought to talk a little first." Obviously Harbison was in the driver's seat. When he walked up the street toward the mill, Moss Tolbeck went with him. Clay followed a step behind. A shabbiness had entered him. The girl admittedly had a lot to do with it. They stood on the bridge and stared down at the green and white turbulence of the water. "Tell you what I've been trying to decide," Tolbeck growled. "Whether to kill you and take a chance on exoneration, or string along. I think there might be some bounty on the pelt, even."

"Not on my pelt," said Key. "I've served my time."

Tolbeck's wide, whiskered jowls chewed on that a while. "What cut do you want?"

"I think half is the logical figure, ain't it? That is, my friend, here, wants to buy in for half."

"And who does your pardner sell out to? Sullivan?"

"No," he said. "This is between you and me, Moss. I thought I might ranch a while."

Tolbeck snapped suddenly: "All right, damn it. Let's get over and finish it up. Then I'll show Mr. Cantrell, if that's the name this rascal's using, what he's just bought into."

SITTING there in the lawyer's office signing the hurriedly framed contract, accepting into his hands Tolbeck's bill of sale on half the land, cattle

and leases owned by the Bar L-Y Cattle Company, Clay felt like a damned fool. And worse—like a crook. He gave Tolbeck a dummy check, already prepared, and they shook hands. They left town together.

The road headed west through cut-over lands and meadows: the wind flapped in their faces, crisp and strong, laden with the odors of pine resin and sage. "What have you told this fellow?" Tolbeck demanded suddenly.

"The whole story," Harbison said blandly.

Tolbeck's iron-gray eyes measured Clay. "I don't know why a civet should apologize to a polecat for smelling bad, but I say any man would have done what I did to feed his family. You missed 'Eighty-three. Cattles were down and timber was up. The big loggers were hogging every grove on the Coast. Harbison came to me with some la-de-da about planning to buck the big ones and doing it according to the book. So many trees to the acre. Cleaning up the trash and protecting the seedlings. He could do everything legal but get the land. That's where I took my bow. I knew the woods around here and settled his people on claims. That's all. But I took payment in checks, and—I'll bet you've got those checks in a strong-box somewheres, ain't you, Key?"

"I'll bet I have!" Key said.

Tolbeck's home place was on the bank of a spring branch at the edge of a meadow. There were a big log house and some smaller sheds. There was a string of five corrals and chutes linked up so it looked to Clay like a woman could handle a herd by herself. The women had not been home long. The girl was expending nervous energy in working over one of the horses of the team with a dandy brush. She saw them coming and threw the brush into a box and went into the house.

Tolbeck said, "You'll bunk in the harness shed. Get your grub out of the kitch-

en and cook it where you please, but keep out from under foot."

When Clay entered the harness shed, the big gambler had kicked a litter of saddles, hames and old bridles into a corner and thrown his bedroll down on the floor. He sat on it, licking a cigarette into shape.

"Nice and homey," he chuckled.

Clay stood above him. "Who's telling it straight?" he demanded.

Harbison picked a flake of tobacco off his lip. "You aren't thinking about a Young Men's Purity League or nothing, are you?"

"I'm not thinking about making a no-good cow thief out of myself."

Harbison got up and took a handful of Clay's shirt. He was cordially vicious. "You're a good kid, Clay. But you're still a kid. Learn to weigh things in your mind before you let them loose. I sprung you from jail. I bought those duds you're wearing. Now, who's telling it straight?"

Clay held his wrist. "I don't know," he said, "but I'm going to find out."

"Let me know when you do. I hope we won't have a falling out. The last man I had one with fell right flat on his face."

"This one won't."

Harbison suddenly grinned and wagged his head. "Boy, boy!" he said. "Put a hangnoose over a man's shoulders and he gets to jumping every time his heart ticks off another beat! Let's kill that pint. After you've had a slug, I want to tell you something."

He reached down and found the bottle, but Clay demanded, "Tell me what?"

"I picked it up in the Ponderosa. Somebody'd just come over from the valley. Clay, that beer-gutted jailer died! That makes things bad for both of us."

Clay sat down on the floor and accepted the bottle. "Yeah, it does." It hammered at him, but he couldn't receive it all at once. He was wanted for murder before, but down in his heart he knew he was not

guilty, and there was always the hope he would be cleared.

"It's tough, how things work out," said Harbison reflectively. "We've got to make our stake and git. By the way," he said, "I didn't mention this before, but when I sell you've got another thousand coming."

IN THE morning they made a branding-sized fire outside the shed and fried venison liver and eggs. Key's curiosity was all for the mountains crumpled up against the back of the home pasture. "I'm going up there today and cruise some timber," he announced, squinting at the high bucksaw range blue with pine and fir and marbled with snow. "That's a fortune, Clay, right there."

"Still going to sell to Sullivan?"

"Why not?"

A door slammed and the Tolbeck girl came out, snatched a bridle off a peg and went into the corral to catch her horse. She passed within six feet of them, but had only one statement to make.

"The black hat would have been more in keeping, at that."

Clay flushed. Key wiped the inner corners of his mouth with his forefinger. "Somebody said something smart about women, once. 'A woman is only a woman,

but a good cigar's a smoke.' Have a cigar, Clay, if you feel yourself slipping."

He took the curse off it with a chuckle, but he sounded more like a somewhat anxious father telling his son to have fun in town, but not to get into any trouble. He brought his pony out of the barn and rode off a few minutes later. The girl, mounted, rode up to the corral gate, and he humped to get there and open it for her. She rode out with her chin high.

"I'm a stranger here," Clay told her. "I wonder if you could tell me which way to the finishing pasture."

"If I weren't so well brought up, I could tell you the way to several places. Unfortunately, I'm going over there myself."

Clay fell in beside her. They rode north through the jackpines. Most of the cows and calves they passed were fleshed out just right. Tolbeck and he appeared to see eye to eye on cattle raising. About the time Clay would be thinking, *There ought to be some salt here to keep those critters from bunching at the spring*, they would pass a box of salt.

"Your dad knows how to raise cattle," he told the girl.

She turned on him. "What do you men think you're going to do here?"

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"Raise cattle, I guess. It's kind of happened fast. We—well we—"

"You wouldn't be hurt," she said, "if I told you you weren't fit to eat leavings in a sheep camp?"

"Not a bit." He had a temper, too, and she had found an edge of it.

"I don't see how you could be. I think you're contemptible."

Clay clinked his spur rowels against the buckskin's hide and the pony took off. But he knew that what he was trying to escape was his own sense of guilt. A moment later she caught up, her oaken hair dancing in the light constraint of a ribbon. She wore a divided leather skirt and a trim red jacket cut from an Indian blanket. The cold and perhaps a drop of triumph glowed in the high planes of her face.

"I think you're stupid, too," she flung at him. "You were fool enough to put your signature on that paper. So when we bring suit, it will be against you, instead of him."

Clay said coolly: "We're going to sell in about a week, so don't try too hard to get used to us."

"Sell! To whom?"

"Webb Sullivan."

He saw shock and disbelief in her face. He saw her look up toward the foothills, and somehow he knew what she was seeing: bull teams snaking logs down muddy skid-roads to the streams, defiling them with mud and trash; graze torn up, cattle injured. Something in Clay Cantrell doubled up like a fist.

They came to a gate. Clay swung down and dragged the four-strand barrier aside for her, and just as he was out of the way he heard a rope-end smack horseflesh and hoofs dig the earth in an urgent staccato. He whirled. She had brought her pony at him savagely, making it rear. Clay stumbled back, caught his spur on the wire and fell against the fence, slashing himself. The pony's hoofs slugged the ground near his leg and Jennie quirted it

again with the rope, crying out to frighten it into the thing all its training was against.

The horse was a creature out of a nightmare, looming above him with hoofs raised, stumbling about on its hind legs. Clay's .44 came to his hand and he raised it, seeing the look of horror on her face, the sudden drenching-out of her unreasoning anger. The gun blasted in the horse's muzzle, but the bullet went three feet wide. With a squeal, the horse reared and went over into a crashing dogfall. Jennie tried to kick clear, but one foot caught in a stirrup, and when the horse came down on the saddle she was lying stretched out beside it, screaming.

Clay dropped the gun and went forward in a scrambling crawl. Grunting in sheer terror, the pony was trying to roll onto its side. Clay piled onto its head and sat there, shouting.

"Kick loose and git!"

Jennie yanked her boot from the stirrup and scrambled away. Clay let the horse lunge up, caught its bridle and held its head down while he talked to it, working it out of its panic. After a while he freed the horse, but held the reins. His glance found Jennie, standing near the fence watching him.

"I think it might be a good idea to walk a spell."

She came over and took the reins. "Thanks for not shooting him. Or was it me?"

"First it was you; then it was him. Then I decided a close miss would be better than a hit on either one."

He caught his pony up, but she was all through with riding for the day. She wanted to go back. "There're some late calves due over there. But we can send a man to check on them."

CLAY'S impulse was to lay everything on the line and explain that it was really all Harbison's idea. Yet there was still a strong pull of anxiety

when he thought of the dead jailer. He kept still.

"How did you ever get tied up with him?" she asked, curiously. "Or is he tied up with you?"

"He did me a favor, once."

"This is an awfully big one you're doing him, if you have any self-respect. Where do you come from, Clay?"

"Every place."

"You won't make any money coming from every place."

"When you start moving at ten, you usually keep moving. Then you get the habit."

Her eyes were clear and reflective. "I wish I really knew why you're in this with him. Of course he wouldn't dare put his name on a government lease again; but how did he happen to run into you?"

Clay grinned. "Lady, you're going to get me talking, and then all of a sudden you'll flash a badge at me."

But she had started some thinking going on in his head. Why had the man picked him? Out of the tangled dark recollections of that night swam a dim picture of Key Harbison at the end of the corridor, tying up the jailer. But he wasn't tying him up at that moment. He was taking the keys from the door of Clay's cell and fitting a key back into the lock of his own. Something Clay had never quite understood.

Suddenly, then he saw the complete and brutal logic of the move. When they found Big Buck, they would find the keys in Harbison's door, as though Clay had made his escape first—as though he had shot the jailer with a hide-out gun and grabbed his keys, then let himself out. And finally, in an uprush of generosity, freed the man across the corridor!

It must have carved itself on his face grimly, for the girl laughed and said, "You should have thought of all the angles before you went into it. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he snapped. "Nothing that wasn't the matter before I ever saw him. Listen," he said. "I want something straight. What was your old man's tie-up with Key?"

"Just what he told you. I know now why Key Harbison was so big about keeping him out of it. Dad was his annuity. Something to bank on in his old age."

Clay made neat little heaps of all the chips he held, matched them against Harbison's, and saw that he couldn't make any kind of bluff at all. But he could do one thing, and the more he thought about it, the more he knew he was going to do it.

"Don't worry," he told her, finally. "Maybe he'll back out after all. He and I are going to have a talk."

Jennie stopped walking. He looked at her. What he looked for was the brittle polish of triumph in her eyes, a taut little smile to complete the devastation her tongue had started. What he saw was softness—softness of relief in her eyes and of liking on her lips.

It stopped him a moment. Then he walked over and turned the stirrup for her to mount. All at once she let both her arms slip around his neck. She waited, a smile at the corners of her lips and a look in her eyes that was at once strength and weakness. He caught the fragrance of her perfume, as delicate as apple-blossoms. Suddenly he held her, holding her face close while he kissed her. He hadn't had much experience with love-making, but he had known there must be something to it—and here it was. Here was the silken cord that was stronger than a chain.

After a while Jennie began to stir, like a girl awaking. The shape of her lips left his, and she covered her face, laughing. "I'm shameless!" she said. Clay wanted to say something; he didn't know what, so instead he let another kiss take the place of it.

But as they went through the last gate into the horse-pasture, he said, "If I can't

put it across, I expect you'll want that kiss back."

"It did start out to be a payment on the mortgage, didn't it?" she said. She whacked the bay with the reins and let it lope on into the yard. . . .

Clay chewed a strip of jerked antelope for lunch and thought about Harbison's advice. *A woman's only a woman* . . . He was playing his cards almighty close to his chest. He was mortally afraid Clay would be seduced by her into integrity. And his worries had been justified.

He was going to have it out with Key. Then they were going to present some papers to old Moss Tolbeck, shake his hand, and ride along. The hard part of it would be Jennie. Clay doubted that cigars would ever give him the lift that ride had.

He was sitting there on the door-sill of the shed, waiting for Key to come back, when a horseman came up the country road at a high jog. He rode a fancy-stepping black Clay had never seen before. He came down through the gray, red-jeweled thicket of coyote berry into the ranch-yard. Clay recognized the bear-like shape and hammer-jawed face of Webb Sullivan. The lumberman reined up and glanced about the yard, chewing on a cigar and frowning. He was in no-man's-land for loggers; his displeasure could be apprehension.

Clay hitched up his pants and walked out to meet him. Sullivan looked easier on discovering him. He gave him a hand salute. "Where's Key?"

"Riding."

"When will he be back,"

"Go look for him, if you're in a hurry."

Sullivan swung down out of the saddle, but Clay walked over and said, "Climb back up. You haven't got a mortgage as big as a postage stamp on this outfit."

Sullivan's direct, black eyes watched Clay's lips move, came back to his eyes and then transferred to the ranch-house for an instant. He laid a hand on Clay's

shoulder. "You aren't in this game, Cantrell. You're just sweating it out. Don't forget that."

"Suppose I do?"

There was a blunt look of satisfaction on Sullivan's face. "One of my loggers came down the Wickiup Pass road last night. There's a standing order that if any marshals or any of that breed are poking around the woods, I want to know it. There's one right now at Murphy's Store, at the Red Barn fork, smelling under every log. He doesn't seem to be a lumber dick, though. I think he's talking about a couple of murders. He's on his way to Cayuse."

Clay took it stonily. "Get out."

Sullivan smiled but turned to mount. "You'll probably want to sell in a hurry and get, if he hits Cayuse. You'd better ride up with me and find Harbison, and we'll arrange something right now."

"What's it take to get an idea across to you?"

Sullivan angrily dropped the oxbow and came against Clay, grasping him by the shoulder and cocking his fist. There was a dark and intemperate anger in his face.

"You young bronco!" he said. "A white man tries to wipe your nose for you and you ain't got the savvy to see that he's doing you a favor. You make more noise than any silent partner I ever saw."

Then his mouth slackened a little and his face got a frozen, poised look. He sucked in his belly muscles, but the barrel of Clay's Colt kept prudding until he grunted. A gun-sear clicked sharply. Sullivan said, "You got two on you now, Clay. You don't want another."

"If I've got two, what's another? I think I'd enjoy this one." Then he stepped back and brought the gun against the side of Sullivan's head almost gently. The lumberman's eyes turned up for a moment as if he were going to fall.

He shook his head, came out of it with

a hand to his ear and panted, "Blast Key for finding one like you!" He fumbled at the stirrup again and mounted the horse. He punished the black with his spurs and hauled it around savagely on its hind legs as he left the yard.

CHAPTER THREE

Hard to Hang

CLAY mounted and paused to turn up his coat collar against the increasing bite of the wind cascading down off the mountains. At this moment the back door of the ranch house opened and Moss Tolbeck came out. He wore his steeple-crowned Montana Stetson and a horsehide jacket. He held up a hand to signify that he was coming along. He saddled his horse and the two of them rode out the back pasture and up a trail toward the mountains.

"Pure guts and stupidity!" Tolbeck said. "Sullivan's lumber stiffs will buck you into six-inch lengths the first time you hit town!"

"I ain't seen any big enough, yet."

"What did you do it for, Cantrell? Jennie says you told her you were backing out."

"I'm going out head first. But I'm taking Harbison with me." He wanted to explain to this warm-eyed old duffer how he had happened to sit in on this game as long as he had. But that involved saying more than he dared. "I didn't know what I was getting into when I signed that paper. But I know enough to get out now."

"I figger you're doing this to help me. Well, you're only going to make it worse. If you crowd him, he'll turn me over to a U. S. marshal."

"Then what's the answer? What do you want me to do?"

"Just take 'er easy, or we'll both be crying into the same shirt-tail. I've got a

mare to check on over here," he said. "See you at the place tonight. Jennie's making a huckleberry pie. Think you'll like it."

It left Clay with no answers, but with a load of new worries. He kept riding upward through the heavy timber, sticky laurel and fireweed, just because he could think better in motion than sitting still. There were parks and long open stretches where bluejoint grew thriftily on sub-irrigated land; it was fine summer range. Too good to be plowed up by log-carts and grazed to bedrock by ox teams.

He heard a horse stiff-legging down a rock-slide at the base of a ridge. It flattened onto softer ground and in a few minutes Key Harbison rode into sight. He was surprised to see Clay waiting at the edge of the meadow. His face was ruddy from the cold.

"Clay, that's a yella pine grove like nothing you ever saw! Sullivan may be a pardner of ours, but he's going to pay for it."

"Sullivan was up today," Clay said.

"Yeah? What'd he want?"

"He says a marshall from across the hill is over at Murphy's Store."

Harbison's eyes scanned the other's face, but read nothing because his thoughts lay deep. He shook his head. "Clay, that's bad. We've got to get you out of this."

"I'd say it was bad for both of us."

Harbison hesitated. "No argument there. But it's still just the gambling charge, with me. And jail-break, now, on top of it."

Clay watched him with gravity and rising anger. "I just thought of something," he said. "When we broke out, we left the key in my cell-door. That would make it look like you killed Big Buck, got the keys and let yourself out and then let me out. So maybe he's after you."

Harbison knew fully what he was getting at. His glance darted away; then he made a motion with his arm as though

working out a kink. Clay had seen it before. He was ready for it; before the derringer fell into his palm he had stood up in the stirrups and smashed heavily at Harbison's jaw.

Harbison received the blow on the side of his head and slewed over half out of the saddle. The gun dangled on its buckskin thong. Clay piled onto him, seizing him by the head and dragging him out of the saddle. They landed heavily. Clay pinned him flat with his full weight. He groped for the gun and found it, pulled the two ring-triggers and blasted the charge into the ground. Then he sat up on Harbison and slugged him on the jaw.

Harbison reached up and clawed at his eyes. He raked a deep, bloody trough across his nose and cheek. Grunting like a boar, he wriggled from under Clay and got onto his feet. Clay was lurching up and sprawling into him, his fury breaking in an engulfing wave. Harbison stubbornly refused to give ground. He took a couple on his chest and hammered through Clay's guard at his head. While Clay's attention was on his fists, he brought his knee up savagely, driving into Clay's crotch. Most of the force went into the thigh, but it landed solidly enough that the griping ache of it unmanned him.

Harbison knew how to follow up an advantage. He squared off with wide-set feet and slammed at Clay's face with both fists until he fell. Clay was down, writhing in slow agony on the pine needles. Harbison kicked at him and the blow took him on the shoulder. When he drew back for another kick, he caught his spur on a rock and stumbled. Clay came to his knees. He compressed all his force into a core of determination and staggered up.

"Stinking little alley cur!" Harbison panted. "Put you in decent clothes, pour you into a mold that makes you look like a man—"

He broke off, covering his face with his hands. Clay had flung a handful of dirt

in his eyes. It stopped Harbison cold, and he leaned into him with a long swing that probed his belly and brought his hands down. Clay cracked the top of his head down on Harbison's nose. Then he got him by the throat with one hand and hammered at his face. He changed the shape of the gambler's mouth with two blows and wound up for a finisher. But Harbison robbed him of this last satisfaction by sinking down.

It was twenty minutes before Clay felt like riding. By this time, Key Harbison was sitting up with his head in his hands. Clay mounted and glanced down at the big, rangy figure covered with dirt and pine needles and with a swollen, unhappy face. Harbison looked up at him.

"I guess you know what you're doing, don't you? Putting your neck in a halter and doing us both out of a good thing."

"I didn't do myself any good tying up with you. Maybe I'll do better now."

"I'll be around a while. I could turn the old man in right now, but I'm banking he's got better sense than you. You've won your *cojones*, Clay. Let's see if you can hang onto them."

THERE were three days on the Bar L-Y when people sat around watching an imaginary fuse and waiting for the explosion. Chores kept them busy; Clay and old Tolbeck put out salt and hung chunks of lava from loose strands of fence to tauten them, and talked about ways to rotate herd bulls to keep them serviceable. They yarned about bad horses they had known and good riders; about the best means of preserving venison.

Tolbeck said on the third afternoon, "I wish I could shut a door and Sullivan and Harbison would disappear. I was just getting fixed around to where I could work this ranch right. I'd have liked to turn you loose on my horse-herd, too. The Army remount service is beginning to look like a first-class market. I think you've

got the makings of a good horseraiser."

It was the first time anybody had admitted that Clay was anything but a wet-nosed youngster, when it came to stock. He had a vision that gave him gooseflesh: Him and Moss at a horse auction, bidding four hundred dollars for two-year-old studs and not batting an eye. The Horse Kings of the Cascades.

"You got any ideas about how to make geldings out of those cut-proud billy goats?" Tolbeck asked him.

"I guess not."

"I just wondered, because I think there's news for us. I seen a pony coming up the road an hour ago, and it's heading back, now."

When they went into the ranch-house, feeling the good scorch of the stove and inhaling the smells of frying meat and potatoes and biscuits of hand-pounded wheat, there was an envelope by Tolbeck's plate. He let it lie there until his thumb had corraled the last of the gravy on his plate. Then he put on his round silver spectacles and read it. He frowned, held it to the light, for no particular reason, and laid it beside Clay's place.

Clay read it. It was from Key Harbison.

Tolbeck: A man named Potter came in this morning, he's a marshal from Coos County, looking for a murderer named Cantrell. He don't know him by sight, and the description he's giving out sounds like a hard-beat harvest hand. If Clay was to come in town in his new duds, he wouldn't know

him. He could come right up to the saw-mill and we'd sign the papers and he could go on. But if Clay ain't in by sundown tomorrow, we'll tell Potter where to find him, and you too. Cordially,

K. H.

Tolbeck removed his spectacles. "There's one word there I don't like."

Clay felt like a hungry hound. He had had a toehold on respectability for a few days, but now they were about to yank it from under him. The word "murderer" would create a ruckus in this placid family scene like a dropped porcelain cup. But there was no longer any hedging it.

"That's what they called me in Red Barn," he said. "You got a Bible?"

There was one about the size of a suitcase on a reading stand. He lugged it over to the table and put both hands on it. "So help me God," he said, "this is what happened."

He recited the whole, miserable saga, keeping his eyes on the cross on the front of the book. At last he looked up, nerved for the impact of their good Unitarian frowns. But Rose Tolbeck had tears on her ruddy matronly cheeks, and Jennie was staring admiringly at him as if it were the most fascinating adventure story she had ever heard. Moss was turning the canister in the middle of the table, squinting at the light reflected from the vinegar cruet.

"They stacked the cards on you, didn't they, son?"

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"If I had the whole deck in my hands now, I reckon I couldn't deal anything but deuces."

He made his manners to Mrs. Tolbeck for the meal and went to the door. "All I know is you'd be foolish to cotton to them. You make out some kind of quit claim and I'll sign it. Harbison could keep right on coming back at you with this until he was too old to chew oatmeal. That wasn't a very big slip you made, and when you come out you'll still have your ranch."

"Maybe."

He went outside. As he walked toward the grain shed, a wedge of light sprawled across the ground. He saw Jennie leave the house. He stood there with the moon-shadow from his hat brim like a mask over his face, until Jennie reached him and tilted it back so she could see his features. There was a gentleness and yet a kind of intensity about her.

"I'm glad you told us, Clay. We knew it was something. Why don't you tell the marshal the same things?"

"Because the marshal is like to be on the peck. He'd have me hung before we got halfway back to Red Barn."

"He wouldn't dare! And I'll tell him so. We'll scrape up money for a lawyer and he'll go back with you."

Clay liked her for her simplicity, her belief in a Golden Rule which was not merely plate, notions which had long ago been leached out of him. He framed her face between his palms and tilted it. He kissed her on the lips. Then he kissed her eyes, and pulled her face down to his neck and held her tightly. She kissed his throat, and gooseflesh went over him. It was the tenderest, the most fragile, the most unretainable moment in the whole of Clay's life.

He looked down at the pallid heart-shape of her face. "Jennie," he whispered. He pulled her down beside him onto the washstand at the entrance to the shed. He kissed her again.

"You haven't said it," she whispered.

"I love you, Jennie!" It was easy to say, it was totally without shame.

"Enough to do what I'm asking?" Her fingers strayed in the crisp blond hair at the back of his head. It was the familiar strength-through-weakness gambit women had been using for aeons, but to Clay it did not seem conniving. They trickled you, but made you like it.

"All right," he said.

Her arms went around his neck.

HE HAD made the promise, but there was nothing to keep him from using plain brone savvy about it. He'd talk to the marshal, but not alone: good old Key would go along. The letter made it sound as though Key were training around Cayuse with Marshal Potter, smoking each other's cigars and exchanging confidences. Whereas Potter undoubtedly carried a warrant for his arrest and Harbison was hiding in the saw-mill waiting to get Clay's signature, collect from Sullivan, and haul out of town.

The letter said to come in his new town rig. Clay hung the new shirt and pants on a harness peg and got into the old ones early next morning. He'd go in with all his cards on the table. He saddled quietly and opened the corral gate. Just as he was about to swing up, Moss Tolbeck came from the house. He wore a heavy coat and had a gun belted on. He signalled Clay to wait.

"I'll go in with you."

"What for? Always seemed to me a man mined enough trouble without prospecting for it."

Tolbeck saddled and handed Clay a paper bag with two of last-night's biscuits and an apple in it as they left. "I've had this thing setting on me so long I'm getting pigeon-chested," he growled. "Whatever happens, I want to clean it up."

They jogged two miles, while Clay tried to think of a casual way to mention that

he might be going to kill a couple of men. "The way I get it, there's only two witnesses against you—Harbison and Sullivan. What if they both got killed in an accident?"

"At the range you're going to brace them, it won't be no accident. But it would be an accident if one of them didn't get you."

Clay protested. "I'm just going to tell Key him and me are going back to Red Barn. I'll probably suggest that Sullivan come along and tell the Cayuse police department what he had rigged up with Harbison."

Tolbeck reflected. "No harm in that," he observed. "That's about how I'd play it."

"You got a family! All the family I've got is a horse named Sawbuck."

"You've got a first mortgage on a family. I saw a horseshoe nail ring on Jennie this morning that she wasn't wearing last night."

Clay got red and shut up.

The ride to Cayuse ate up four hours. From the last hill north of town they surveyed the brief main street, a tawny strip between shingle and sheet metal roofs. It was a quiet weekday, with a few alfalfa farmers in for supplies and mail, a handful of ranch people circulating around. A breeze carried the bluish mill-smoke across the town. They could hear like distant cork-poppings the report of the steam shotgun.

Somewhere stood a strange horse at a hitchrack. The kind of man its owner was might determine how things went today, assuming Clay got farther than Key Harbison. From the cut of most smalltown lawmen Clay had rubbed against, he would be a self-important character who liked his whiskey frequent, his women loud, and his prisoners young. What Clay had to do offered no spice whatever. It was as dirty and unappetizing a job as digging a load of night-soil from under a privy.

They entered the town quietly and rode along, conversing but not looking at much of anything. Some men who looked old enough to know better were sitting on the hitchrack of the Ponderosa Bar, spitting at a can in the road. One of these men was a big, beefy customer with a star on the holster of his gun and his hat on the back of his head. Clay froze. At that moment the man scored a hit on the can, and everyone was too busy hooraying to pay much attention to the riders. A moment later, someone exclaimed and the talking ended abruptly.

Clay let his horse step out. Someone shouted, "Moss!"

Tolbeck turned and waved at the man and kept riding. They heard sounds of discussion rising, but kept on the move until they had passed the bend just below the bank. Then they put the gaffs to their ponies and hit for the sawmill. The thunder of the horses' hoofs on the bridge rose briefly over the clamor of the mill; Clay wondered if the pair waiting in Sullivan's office had seen them enter town; if they had heard the horses crossing the bridge.

He knew the chance they were taking in ramping down on them this way, with all the advantage to the men waiting with cocked guns for a door to open. The thought chilled him. He began nerving himself up with illusions of his own invincibility. Yet as they left their horses and started up the banister-less stairs to the cutting floor, the blood seemed to leak down through his whole body to his fingertips and his feet, leaving him cold and his extremities thick and clumsy.

He reached the warm, reeking chaos of the deck and shot a searching look through the smoky litter. There were only three men in sight: the sawyer, making an adjustment; a big wooden-faced man pulling planks onto the green chain; and the ratchet-cutter, rigidly sitting his iron saddle on the carriage that fired up and down

the room drawing a log through the saw.

Then he saw that the door to Webb Sullivan's office was partly open, and through the narrow wedge he had a glimpse of the hard, vigilant face of Key Harbison.

CLAY strode across the room with his Colt at his hip. He stood aside from the door and shouted through the plank wall. "We're going in, Key. Moss and I are going to talk to the marshal. You're going along to tell them about Big Buck."

Moss Tolbeck was over at one side, keeping an eye on the workmen while he grubbed in a wooden barrel. Suddenly a gun roared inside the office and a long splinter tore off the wall near him and fell at his feet. He jumped back, indecisive. Tolbeck straightened from the barrel with a big handful of greasy cotton waste in his hand. He struck a match and the stuff burned with a heavy gray smoke. Within the office, Sullivan, always edgy about fires, let out a scared bleat.

"Roast in hell or roast right here," Tolbeck invited.

The door kicked open. Harbison, the gambler for big stakes, came through in a dive, landing on his belly with a carbine in his hands. He hit hard and rolled on his side to bring the gun onto Clay.

Clay began to fire, his unsureness shaken out of him. He put out three shots without being aware of cocking. He saw the torn place in Harbison's coat, near the shoulder. The gambler's gun gently sagged to the floor.

A revolver spun out of Sullivan's office and clattered on the floor. The lumberman kept out of sight, but there was no mistaking his intention. He was a mortally hurt man, brought to his knees by the smell of powder smoke.

The marshal and his posse arrived a couple of minutes later. Potter sized the whole thing up in a glance.

"You hard-mouthed young hell-fry!" he shouted. "Out of one scrape and into another. Now, why didn't you tell me, if you knew where he was?"

"I was trying to take him prisoner for you. You don't have to believe this, but it was Harbison that killed Big Buck."

Potter had a mouth for disgust. He surveyed Clay from spurs to Stetson. "You've got to tell me my business, haven't you? If I wanted you, I'd have the leg irons on you by now. I wanted Harbison, and now I suppose he's got to be preserved in rock-salt so I can haul him back across a pack horse. Big Buck was dying when we found him, but he wasn't dead. He said Harbison shot him."

"What about that Yamhill buck I'm supposed to have killed?" Clay asked.

Potter had bent to rifle Key Harbison's pockets. "Him? That's off the calendar. The morning after you left, the Indian that was going to testify drug in what was left of your pardner, a kid named Shank. He said he'd made a mistake. *This* was the one that killed his friend. Take my advice," he said, glancing up in petulant dislike. "Get a job. Don't pick up with no more trash like that or you will hang, next time."

A man to get out of a game while he was still winning, Moss took Clay's elbow. "He's already got a job," he said. He gave Sullivan a look he hoped he would understand. "I just turned down an offer on my timber leases. I figure to start running horses up there. If there's no squawk from anybody down here."

Sullivan smiled wanly and said he didn't see where anybody could object.

They left town a few minutes later. More than anything else, Clay was anxious to get out of these run-down clothes of his, that made a man feel like a ten-dollar rannihan. Next, he was going to see what the mail-order catalogues offered in the way of diamond rings to replace bent shoeing nails.

The bandits came along
—riding light



*A gun-shy sheriff was Arizona's
Marty Wells—but no badman
could deny he was always good
to the other gent's—*

LAST DROP

By Skippy Adelman

THEY elected Marty Wells sheriff of Graham, Arizona, because no one wanted the job then. It was 1878 and Marty Wells wanted the job as little as anyone else, but someone had to be sheriff. The last three had died with their boots on, weighed with bandit lead. They were Bill Ferris, Big Joseph Connelly, and "Slats" Morris.

Oscar Lieberskind was young, but dangerous. At twenty there were eight notches on his gun if he was cutting notches; three for Graham county sheriffs, one for a town marshal in another state, four for ordinary citizens who had gotten in his way while he was relieving them or others of bags of gold or silver.

In idle sporting competitions Marty Wells had proven that he was a better than fair shot. But he had never thrown lead at a living human. In grim desperation Lieberskind had downed men with his Colts at two hundred feet.

Boldened by repeated successes, Lieberskind and his two aides, both older than himself, didn't even try to hide out. They

were living in a cave not five hundred yards off the road and were easily visible to strangers. At night their fire glowed bright, red, and defiant.

Marty knew that no one wanted to join him against Lieberskind. They would, of course, if he called for a posse or for deputies; they weren't the kind to let a man ride alone, but they'd rather not go. With an ancient spy glass Marty studied the "hideout," its surroundings, the rocky hillock in which yawned the cave where the three bandits stored their supplies and in front of which they slept. He laid out his plan of battle.

When morning came the horses whinnied and the three bandits stirred in their blankets. They prepared to rise. A shout interrupted them. A shout from on high, from the top of the rocky hillock.

"One move and I let this rock drop on you three. I've also got a rifle up here. Start walking toward town—real slow. Don't bother to take anything along."

The bandits came along—ridin' light on their last trail on earth.

STARVATION CREEK

By GIFF CHESHIRE

Joady stood still as the quirt cut him across one shoulder and then the other. . . .



In a land where fight made right and death made a friend—a sod-busting kid found that the grass seldom grows greener — on the next man's grave!

IT WAS well after daybreak when Joady Tasmin rode into the bottoms, much later than he had planned. He saw smoke lifting from the tin chimney of the tarpaper nester shack, which meant that Hester was up and making breakfast. He had wanted to be back in bed before

she awakened, but the water boiling under Old Cash Prior's sluice gates had held him fascinated.

He halted Buck, twisting his strapping frame in the battered stock saddle, arguments running hot in his mind as they had in the night. The creek bed was still moist well up on its sandy banks, with puddles glistening along the bottom. A water mark on the small earth dam showed how much had washed against it and swirled out through the diversion ditch to the parched alfalfa flat. Already the stunted, sunburnt hay crop seemed to have taken on new vigor.

He thought, *Well, I done it, and the devil with Slash P*, but it didn't quite put down the uncertainty that had come to him. He swung his glance to the hand hoist and heaped sub-soil at the near edge of the flat. It marked the spot where his father had nearly finished a dug well before, only weeks ago, a cave-in had crushed the life from him. Thinking of that, the rage boiled up in Joady again, and he was ready to face his sister.

He stabled the buckskin colt, rubbing its ears fondly after he pulled off the bridle and receiving its nuzzling. It seemed to him that Buck was the only thing this dry, starving land had ever given him, and Buck was also a thing the land could take away. Joady remembered this with fear wrapping cold about his heart, and strode along the scuffed path to the black, battened shack.

Hester failed to call out when he halted on the porch to wash and slick down his heavy dark hair, and when he came on into the kitchen her face showed him nothing at all. She was twenty, two years the older, though she seemed to him always to have been old. She was fair and pretty, a girl with a swift, incisive motion that rarely disturbed the discipline of her face. She still did not speak.

Joady took seat at the breakfast table, reading the censure in her silence and

turning his goading truculence against it. This breakfast, he thought, was symbolic of the conditions he aimed to destroy. But the night had made him ravenous, and he tackled the fried salt pork and boiled hominy while he waited for his sister to start in on him.

Coming to her own chair, Hester said, "I heard you leave, last night. I didn't see through it till I heard water coming down the creek."

It brought a defiant triumph to Joady. Not even Hester could get the water out of the ground and back up the creek behind Prior's dam, where it had come from, forcing him to undo another of what she called his headstrong notions. She had ought to 'be glad; the Lord knew she had prayed since early summer for rain or, as an alternative, for Old Cash Prior's heart to be softened.

Hester did not start to eat, and there was only that to reveal how deeply she was troubled. "Some Slash P rider's bound to see the lower creek's been watered. They'll raise the Old Ned."

Joady stared at her, not letting her behind his guard. You never could tell about Hester, any more than you could turn her from what she had set head and heart upon. Maybe she was glad to have the creek water on the flat and only worried over what the big cow outfit would do. Or maybe the right and wrong of it was quarreling in her head, as it did so often.

He said, "Then let Old Cash start the lawing. It's what he's always told us we could do. Let him. He's got the money for it."

"Pa always abided by the law. You know he never countenanced force. He aimed to prove our rights in court when he got the money. He always said that till they were decreed by God or government, men had no rights. I expect he's mighty displeased, this morning."

Joady wheeled up from the table and left the kitchen. Hester had known exactly

where to hit him. Their father had been the greatest man who ever lived. He had had a courage far greater than his son's, a courage strengthened by patience. Joady knew that. He knew his own spunk to be too hot, too quick. He was as notional as Hester claimed, but he couldn't help it. Not when he thought of his father dying in his plodding care not to abuse the justice he thought so highly of; not when his grief over that was a thing that drove him constantly.

He went into the yard and resumed work on the cellar Hester wanted dug to store the root crop she was trying to grow, hand-watering from the shallow house well. It was all they would have to winter on unless they grew hay to sell. He couldn't face a winter like that, after the two they had shared with their father. There were times when his still growing body cried out so strongly for fresh, red meat that he could think of nothing else. A man needed food that larded his frame, and he was a man. He had proved that in the night by going up and turning loose the creek water Old Cash Prior had pooled so jealously behind his dam. He couldn't bide such privation when it paid off in nothing but death and greater adversity.

The notion that was anathema to Joady began to work up from his half-starved tissues. Hester came out of the barn leading Goldie, the heifer that was her pride and joy as Buck was his. Both pets were unfortunates, cast up by chance on the nester claim. Goldie had been abandoned by a passing settler with a milk cow that had calved on the trail, and who had had no means of transporting the weak little animal. Before that, Joady had caught the buckskin colt back in the brakes, orphaned, strayed or abandoned by a bunch of oreanas. It wasn't proper that he should regard Buck as he did and yet let the sight of Hester's pet put the bitter bite of acid in his jaws.

IT WAS around noon when Old Cash Prior rode in with his son Sam. The cowman's snowy face wore a tight rage as he studied the creek bed, then turned his attention upon the alfalfa. He swung his mount and rode to where Joady still dug at the pit. Bleak and impassive, Sam came up behind. Joady stuck his shovel in the earth and turned to look as Old Cash swung down, riding quirt dangling from his thick wrist. Hester came quietly from the house and into the yard, but neither Prior glanced her way.

Old Cash's stalking approach lifted fear in Joady, but he refused to back up. He stood still while the quirt cut him first across one shoulder and then the other, and he stared steadily into a pure rage in the cowman's eyes.

In a voice like the cracking of pond ice, he said, "Cash, if it weren't for that white hair, I'd bust your back."

Hester stood without moving. Sam's eyes were flinty, his face unstirred. Old Cash stared at Joady for a moment, then hauled around and swung aboard his big gelding.

Ignoring Joady, he addressed Hester. "You better get a check-rein on that big-headed kid. Men've been shot for foolin' with other people's water. Told your dad when he come here he'd never make out. They don't call it Starvation Creek for nothing. Seen a dozen nester outfits come in and go busted. I got legal rights to the upper creek. Had my dam in before you were born. Slash P never harmed ary nester. But comes a dry summer, it aims to have water. Your dad was told that before he settled here. Had every warnin'. You'd ought to kite it. That's what you'll do in time, anyhow." He turned the gelding and rode away.

Sam lingered, his veiled attention moving from Joady to Hester. A tall, gaunt redhead, he was good-looking when he smiled, but he didn't now. "Sorry Cash had to do it, Miss Hester. But Joady can't

pull a thing like that. You think you got rights to crick water, and we think different. Even lawin' won't cut you a piece of it because there just ain't any water to spare. You anyhow scared Cash enough he looked into it." When Hester did not answer, he looked at Joady again. "Been noticin' that buckskin, kid. He'll fetch you a hundred any time you want to let him go. Looks like you ought to and use the money to light your shuck. Or waste it on lawin', if you'd rather. I'd like a chance at him." At Joady's silence, Sam nudged his horse and rode after Old Cash.

Joady picked up his shovel, a fear driving the outrage from him. Hester did not know that this was not the first offer he had had for Buck, though it was the best. He turned away from her searching gaze and set to work.

When he rode out on Buck that night it was not toward Prior's dam on the upper creek but across the bottoms and onto the high desert. At day's end he had seen unmistakable signs of freshening in the parched alfalfa, and this result of his efforts had put a new boldness in him. This time he had been carefully quiet slipping out and was sure Hester had not heard him or she would have put a stop to it. For a while a lurking guilt rode with him, but his fear for Buck destroyed it. Since Hester would never let them quit the claim, he had to use the fight that had maybe saved the hay or he would lose his

horse to Sam Prior as sure as shooting.

He knew exactly where he was heading, and at the top of a draw found a bunch of Slash P steers he knew had strayed far from the main herd. He untied his rope and shook it out and rode boldly upon the bunch to lift it to its feet. He got his chance sooner than he had expected when a young steer lifted its tail and streaked out on a quarter across the slant.

He put Buck in motion, the mount's stride easily outdistancing the steer's. As he had practiced upon fence posts and Goldie and even Buck, Joady shot his loop in a clean drop over the animal's immature horns. Buck had not been trained to hunker at the lasso, in the manner of cow ponies, but with his rope dallied Joady cut outward and brought the steer down in a hard fall. A wild, heady pleasure ran in him as he swung the horse on a tight line and paused to look at the still shape on the other end.

It was touch and go fighting the steer toward the draw, once it had struggled to its feet and decided to free itself. He let it bust out at the end of the rope time after time, until it had got the lunging notion jerked out of it. Each time he worked his prize farther from the curious, milling bunch. Finally in the draw, he let it line out at a pounding run. On the open bottoms below he had the whole tussle to fight over again.

By the time he reached the barn, nearly



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dragging the fought-out steer, he knew he would have to hurry. Dismounting, he found and lighted a lantern, then managed the animal inside and snubbed its head to a post. He was trembling, and he realized that this was not from the excitement but from a reluctance rising heavily within him. But a look at Buck gave him his answer. He firmed his jaw and dug a single-bitted axe out of the hay, where he had concealed it that evening, together with a butcher knife. He approached the steer with his tremor shaking him, positioned, and shut his eyes as he swung.

The impact jarred to his elbows. When he heard a soft, tumbling grunt he looked and saw the creature kneel into a slow fall. Calmness came with the transition from steer to beef, and he seized the knife and set to work. When the carcass was swung up, skinned and dressed, dawn streaked the sky, and he knew Hester would soon be stirring. Between sickness and high elation, he cleaned up the mess, buried the hide under the hay, and hurried to the house.

He got inside and into bed without trouble, but a tight concentration that filled his mind kept sleep at a distance. He had barely begun to drowse when Hester's carrying scream came to him from the barn. He opened his eyes to full day, tensing, living with her the moment it would take to discover that the carcass was not her pet's. Then a satisfaction that was half defiance possessed him. She could no more get life back into the beef carcass than she had been able to restore Prior's water. Again she would have to accept an accomplished fact.

He pretended to be asleep when she came to his door, but her unlifted voice punched into his attention.

"You rustled on Slash P."

Joady lifted his head and pushed up on his bare elbows. "You reckon you can sew the hide back on him, Sis, and run him back up to his bunch?" He grinned.

"Beef steak—biscuits—pan gravy. How soon's breakfast?"

He saw her swallow, and for the first time it struck him sharply that her girl's body could cry out for substantial food, the same as his. He saw her face work in the subtlest way before her mouth hardened.

"You'll take it over to Slash P and tell Cash Prior what you done."

"He's been starving us. He can feed us till we get a crop and can law him, even if he don't know it. And we'll have a crop, if you'll leave me be. Even pa used to say many a nester'd got his start on some slow elk."

"You can call it that, but it's still stolen beef. You'll take it over to Cash Prior or I will."

Hester turned and left.

A moment later he heard the back door close. He took his time about dressing, rebellion lifting his shoulders and holding them tight. Having taken a stand, Hester would stay on it. When he sauntered down to the barn, finally, she had got the plough horses hitched to the wagon. Paying him no heed, she backed the wagon through the big door and under the hung carcass, which dropped into the wagon bed when she loosened the tackle. She worked swiftly, implacably, as though this thing had to be undone before she could breath freely again.

"Get the hide, too, Joady," she said in a flat voice.

He stood for a long moment in refusal, but something coming with her steady gaze took the starch out of him. He got the bloody hide from under the hay and flung it into the wagon. He let her drive out onto the road before he bolted hotly ahead and sprung up on the turning wagon hub.

Hester pulled in the team, then handed him the lines and dropped down. He slapped the lines viciously and sent the wagon jolting away.

AN ENORMOUS relief broke in him as he drove down the last rise above Slash P's sprawling headquarters structures, for he could see nobody about. When he rolled into the compound an oldster hobbled out of the bunkhouse and scowled at him.

"Where's the boss?" Joady called.

"The boys went out on round-up, this morning. Cash and Sam too. What you after?"

"Nothing. Brung you something. Got a beef that used to wear your brand. Critter strayed into our barn and hit its head on a axe. I dressed it for you. Where you want it?"

The old man gave him a puzzled scrutiny, hunting grounds for hostility and not quite locating them. "You been shaking a long loop, kid?"

"Brung you the beef, didn't I?"

The oldster puzzled for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, hang it in the cooler. Ain't my concern, but Cash'll skin you if'n you been taking out spite on his stuff."

"Where's your cooler?" Joady asked.

He was far from relieved when he drove the wagon home. Old Cash surely would raise hob when he heard about it, and the inevitability of this began at last to worry him. Where the trail touched the south edge of the alfalfa flat he began to feel better, though. It was remarkable how much the hay had revived after a single day with moisture. That had been one thing Hester had not been able to make him undo, a thing that even Old Cash had had to let ride.

He didn't see Hester when he drove up to the barn, but the smoking stack flue told him she was fixing their noon meal. Hominy and salt pork—he shuddered, unhitched and turned the horse into the south pasture. He was putting the halters back in the barn when something caught his attention. In the open area beyond the hay pile, and on the tackle he had used for the Slash P steer, was another beef carcass, a

smaller one with a front quarter missing. He gasped in protest, shaken by the sight he knew to be only a translation of his own hungry thoughts. He staggered out through the barn door.

He caught the smell of cooking meat as he neared the shack, and fought a convulsion in his throat. Hester turned away quickly as he came into the kitchen. He couldn't stand the sight of the smoking skillet on the stove, or what was covered by a cloth on the pantry table. The smell from the skillet brought nausea up in him violently, and he went out to the yard again.

Hester followed, with only a tightness about her eyes to tell what she had felt in the hours while he was away. She said, "We should have done it sooner, Joady. I aimed to, but I kept putting it off." He wheeled and bolted for the creek and kept walking. . . .

His shadow fell long ahead of him when he came back to find Hester off somewhere. Nothing had been changed in the kitchen except that the fire was out. Joady got the beef quarter from the pantry, keeping it carefully wrapped, and he dumped the cold contents of the skillet in with it. He picked up the shovel at the root cellar and went down across the creek to the well his father had nearly finished. He dug a deep trench there, hitched the team and hauled the beef carcass to it.

He buried it all, and a black rage swelled in him as he looked at his work and the unfinished work of his father. Trudging stolidly beside the wagon, he returned it to the barn and pastured the horses again. At the tool shed he picked up a sledge and a pair of wedges, then struck off up the creek.

The lazy water of Starvation Creek had pooled again behind Cash Prior's log-and-earth dam, its pent-up, fattening upper reach glistening in the lowering sun. He set to work with sledge and wedge, knocking the sluice gates apart log by log. He

made a thorough thing of it, not pausing until each piece had shot downward on the rush of browning water and the earth wings had begun to dissolve. Then he picked up his tools and went home. He halted at the lower dam to shut off the lateral to the alfalfa field, then turned to watch the water climb in the pool behind him. Nothing on earth now could keep them from having enough water to make a hay crop. Hester was in the shack, but she had no questions, no remonstrance.

It turned hotter. In the week that followed Joady used water as needed and watched the alfalfa green up and grow. Yet each day pulled the tensions tighter about his heart, and he kept watching the western horizon, beyond which Slash P was conducting its fall beef round-up. Sooner or later Old Cash would come gunning, for Joady knew he had flung down a challenge no self-respecting man could meet with anything short of equal violence. And he could not understand the meaning of Hester's strange submissiveness, unless the heart had gone out of her completely because of Goldie.

At the end of another fortnight Sam Prior dusted in over the horizon on a lathered cow pony, riding up to the nester shack with a rocky set replacing the mild geniality of his features. He came from the direction of Slash P and the destroyed dam and swung down at the Tasmin door. At the supper table, Hester looked up from her plate, her eyes meeting Joady's for the first time in many days. He thought with a shock that something flickered in them that was not friendly to himself, and he shoved up and stepped out into the yard.

Sam's tall, lean body was bent, and his palms pressed his thighs. He said, "So you wouldn't take warning. Now there's hell to pay. Cash and the boys're coming in with the beef cut. What did you think we needed that water for? How're we going to hold a bunch that size on dry graze? Be two-three weeks before Cash

can dicker with a buyer and we're ready to trail to the railroad. What's going to keep that stuff on its feet till we can move it?"

Joady met the full force of Sam's shaking fury. "Slash P ever worry about how we could make out with no water?"

"Pup, you can't light in the middle of another man's holdings and just claim yourself a piece. I aim to teach you that." Sam surged forward, but at that moment Hester appeared in the doorway, bringing him to a halt. He hauled off his hat, uncertain.

"Go ahead," Hester said. "It's what Pa would have done."

A broad grin broke on Sam's face as he whipped in. His jaw tight and thrusting in disbelief, Joady planted his feet and drove his fist at Sam's jaw. It shot over Sam's shoulder, and Sam's fist belted him hard in the belly. He went down on his haunches, sliding on the baked earth. He drew a knee under him, eyes squinting, and shoved up. He pelted Sam all the way to the woodshed and nailed him against the wall.

He cocked a fist to finish it when something cracked on his chin. He splat his bottom on the earth again, through blurred daylight seeing that the grin still lingered on Sam's face. It was not of mirth but cold, destructive, punishing. Sam let him climb erect, then drove him down again. Joady lurched up instantly, and this time a quivering, cold-running blackness crushed the fight out of him.

HIS senses cleared with the realization that somebody had emptied the water bucket on his head. He shoved to a sit, hunting Sam and locating his back where Sam stood listening to Hester, the water bucket still in his hand.

"Turn your steers in on us," Hester was saying. "There's no way we can put the water back, but you can come down here to get it."

The rage resurging in Joady died under shock and dismay. Bedamned if she wasn't setting out to undo the one thing he had figured impossible. "No!" he gasped. "Them steers'd tromp the hay to smithereens!"

Hester looked at him and stepped into the house.

Sam was running his hand up and down the back of his neck, his attention on the ground. He turned to look at the creek water which was backed up behind the nearby dam.

He went to his horse, swung up and pounded off.

At dusk the Slash P beef gather came on like a destructive tide. Joady had thought of a dozen resorts, from holding them off with a gun to riding for the sheriff. But Hester had hamstrung him. So he saddled Buck and rode off into the high desert, skirting far wide of the oncoming herd.

As full night came on, he dismounted on a high knoll and stretched out, pillow-ing his head on his arms.

Rebellion ran in him. He had made them a hay crop, for which Hester had prayed and slaved and suffered, and she had thrown it away. He couldn't make heads nor tails of that. Yet his anger against her was checked by that lurking sense of guilt. He rolled over and looked up to the bright stars that had come out in the sky. In that instant he knew that

his father would have done exactly what Hester had. But why? Instead of an answer, Joady found only mounting confusion in his mind, his rage simmering into a perplexed unease. Then his grief broke and rocked him for the first time since the well caved in.

Fatigue followed, and he dozed into unexpected sleep.

He came alert with no sense of elapsed time, but the cold that had crept into his body told him it had been a while. Buck had mosied off a distance but was still nearby, munching at the scattered bunchgrass through his trailed reins. Joady rose with an odd, settled sense holding his attention, and as he strode to the horse decision came.

He rode quietly downward, feeling a calmness he'd long missed in the star-filled night.

He skirted the bedded Slash P cattle above the shack and saw, below, that Hester had left a light in the window. He frowned in wonder as he rode in among the shadowed buildings, for a saddle horse stood in droop-necked sloth before the shack.

He recognized at first glance that it was Sam Prior's horse and, swinging to the porch, he dismounted and left Buck beside it.

Hester and Sam were at the table, and though they watched him come in neither spoke nor changed expression. One of



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Sam's eyes was blackened, his lips were puffed, and a sore stiffness in Joady's face told him he bore the same souvenirs from the fight.

He saw that Sam showed more guardedness than hostility. There was the stub of a pencil and a tatter of wrapping paper on the table. Hester was scooted forward in her chair as if she had been figuring and explaining something to Sam, the way she often did with Joady.

"Sam," Joady said, "what'll it cost to fix your dam?"

Sam gave him a thoughtful frown. "Can't say. Crew's wages mostly. Snaking in some new logs and scraping dirt. Why?"

"Would a hundred dollars do it?"

"Expect."

"Is Buck still worth a hundred to you?"

"He sure is."

"Would he square the dam?"

"Why, I guess." Something swirled in Sam Prior's eyes that took the hardness out of them, and for some reason Joady felt better. Anyhow, Sam had the sense to be pleased to get a horse like Buck. Hester dropped her glance to the table and shielded her eyes with a hand. Sam rose and said goodnight. "In that case, we'll forget that rustled steer, since Hester says you had a change of heart there, too."

Sam rode out presently, leading Buck. It was the moment Joady had expected to crush his heart. He drew in his breath, but to his surprise nothing happened in his chest.

"We better get to bed, Joady," Hester said.

"He sparking you?"

"Fiddlesticks," Hester said, but she turned her face away.

When he wakened at daybreak, Joady realized he had slept sounder than he had in weeks. Hester was up and out somewhere, and when he stepped into the yard he halted on the porch, staring across the creek.

"The alfalfa!" he gasped. "They didn't tromp it out!"

"No," Hester said, and she came out of the wood shed with kindling on her arm. "Sam watered his cattle here, but he had his riders keep it on this side of the creek. They'll do that till they're all ready to drive."

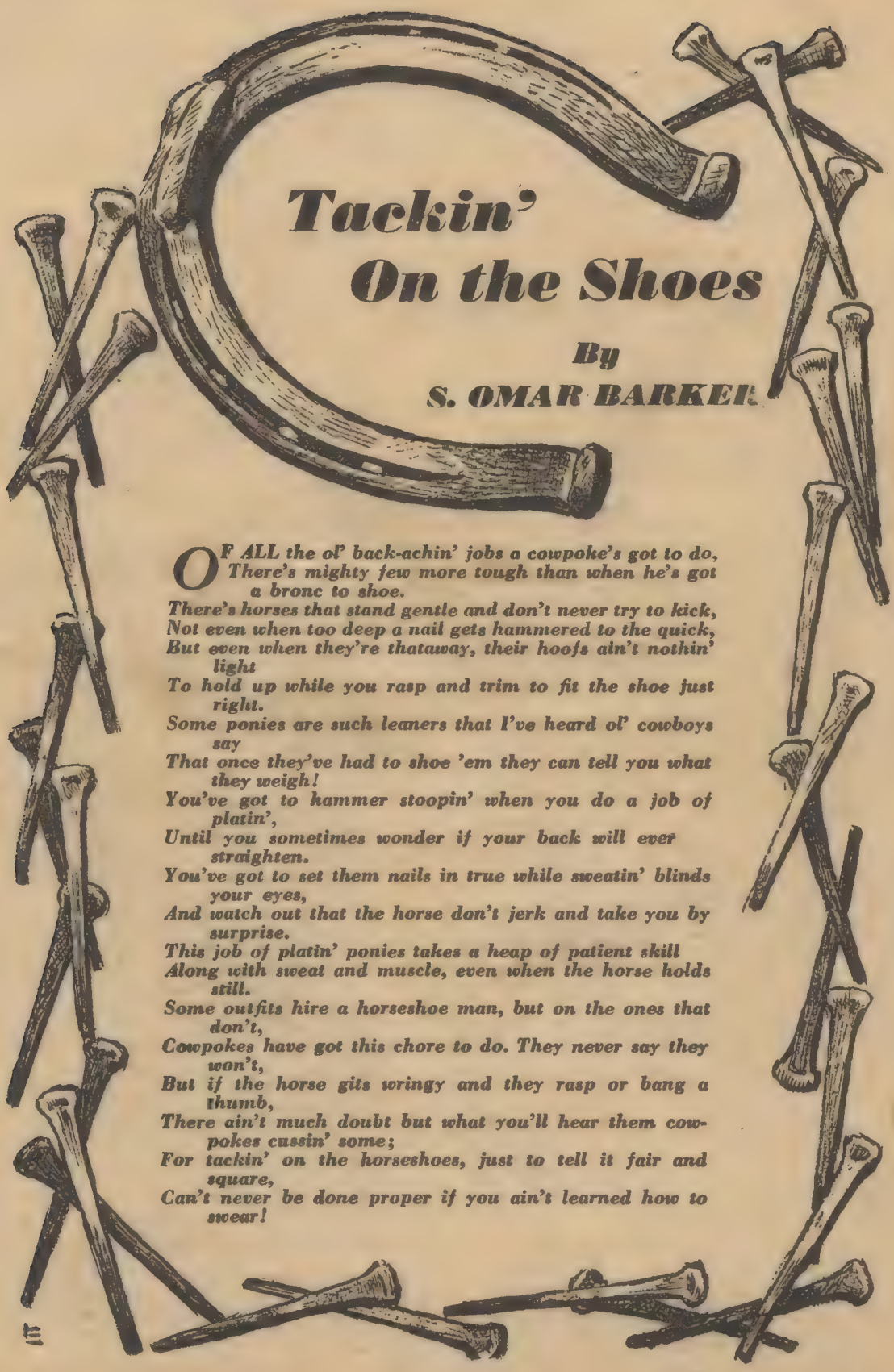
"I'll be jiggered," Joady breathed. "We still got a hay crop." He looked at his sister.

"And a market," Hester said. "Old Cash fogged in last night, breathing fire. You should have seen Sam raise up on his hind legs and talk. Took Cash across the creek and showed him what water'll do to this soil. Told him if we managed right there was plenty of water for both. And Slash P could sure use handy hay for wintering. With me thinking Sam didn't have a ounce of spunk in him." There was a kind of awe in Hester's voice. "They're buying all the hay but four tons. Sam's going to swap you Buck for them. I made him promise before I'd dicker. Because I knew what you'd do in the end, Joady, just as I reckon Pa knew."

Something glowed in Hester's eyes for a moment, and there was only this to show the happiness that filled her. Then she stepped inside with her kindling to start a breakfast fire.

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Tackin' On the Shoes

**By
S. OMAR BARKER**

OF ALL the ol' back-achin' jobs a cowpoke's got to do,
There's mighty few more tough than when he's got
a bronc to shoe.

There's horses that stand gentle and don't never try to kick,
Not even when too deep a nail gets hammered to the quick,
But even when they're thataway, their hoofs ain't nothin'
light

To hold up while you rasp and trim to fit the shoe just
right.

Some ponies are such leaners that I've heard ol' cowboys
say

That once they've had to shoe 'em they can tell you what
they weigh!

You've got to hammer stoopin' when you do a job of
platin',

Until you sometimes wonder if your back will ever
straighten.

You've got to set them nails in true while sweatin' blinds
your eyes,

And watch out that the horse don't jerk and take you by
surprise.

This job of platin' ponies takes a heap of patient skill
Along with sweat and muscle, even when the horse holds
still.

Some outfits hire a horseshoe man, but on the ones that
don't,

Cowpokes have got this chore to do. They never say they
won't,

But if the horse gits wringy and they rasp or bang a
thumb,

There ain't much doubt but what you'll hear them cow-
pokes cussin' some;

For tackin' on the horseshoes, just to tell it fair and
square,

Can't never be done proper if you ain't learned how to
swear!

BORN TO THE

"It ain't always far from wildness to badness, kid — sometimes it's just a six-gun carry from bein' right to killin' a man!"

CHAPTER ONE

Gunsmoke Answer

AT FIRST DAWN, the fast drum of a wild and reckless gallop pulsed out of the still murky hills, and swelled, and then sank into the smudged gray and yellow sky beyond the basin's rim.

The girl opened her eyes and lay there listening, a relaxed, sleepy smile parting the broad bow of her lips. Nobody, she thought, would ride with that mad recklessness in this hour of shifting, fluid darkness, except Wild Curley Reagan. She stretched lazily, the rhythm of his passage pulsing in her, stirring secret depths of her nature as wild and lawless and primitive as his. She had the lithe, supple movements of a puma and she flexed her body with small sounds of feline satisfaction, letting her thoughts drift into flights of lawless fancy until she brought herself up sharp and shucked off the covers.

She put a match to the rose-shaded lamp beside her bed and waited for the soft yellow coal oil light to spread, her senses sharpening with the invigorating chill of the hour. She carried the lamp across the room and looked into her watery, mottled mirror, smiling at the distortion of her dark turbulent beauty, and smoothing her jet hair back with her wrist. She had quizzical eyes, knowing and mocking, with finest lines of humor creasing from the corners. But a hint of



WILD ONES

By

T. C. McCLARY



He wheeled his horse and smashed
Coyote Tait against a post. . . .

girlishness was still in the soft rebellious line of her lips.

She dressed and moved through to the kitchen. With the fire stoked up, she threw open the door to dawn's clean, sweet airs, poking her head outside with curiosity to study the square of yellow light flickering against the clinging shadows and swirling mists far on the surging up-thrust of the mountain. She thought of Wade Rand with friendly sharpness, "Setting up there like a vulture watching everything on the whole danged range!"

Bigbuck Teague, her pa, came through hauling up a single galoose, a loose-hung, gray-haired giant with sinews tough as old rawhide and the frame of a mountain oak. He grunted and moved out to the wash-racks, and was making sounds like a steam calliope in the basin when Easy Mathis galloped in from night riding.

"Boss," Mathis drawled with worry, "there has been somebody prowling our graze for a week now, and last night I made sure of it; I seen him. But it was only one rider and that don't sound like a rustling outfit."

Her father cussed and fell into contemplative silence, and then growled, "He's getting the layout. Well, there is no way to stop it. I have got to take that trail drive myself tomorrow, with Walters sick. Any idee who the rider was, Easy?"

"Nope," the rider answered. "It was a big hombre, but that is all I could tell."

"Mebbe some nester needing to cut out some eating beef," Bigbuck considered, then decided against that, "But no, not moseying around for a whole week!"

He came back into the house for first coffee and had it standing and went back out for morning checkup. In an hour he was back with day's first spread of pure golden light chasing the last shadows in the hollows. He sat down at the kitchen table, grunting, "You'll have to bring your cousin Mattie out here for next week."

"That hatchet tongue!" the girl muttered with a peeve.

The old man dug into his flapjacks and steak without argument. He was half way through when the dust-muffled cllop of a horse sounded in the yard, and Rand Wade rode in.

"Lite for vittles, you poor, miserable, half-starved mountaineer!" Bigbuck belled out, and shortly Wade came in, doffing his hat to the girl and darkening beneath his weathered color.

He was a man whose solid size was not apparent, because of his quietness—quietness of temper, of speech, and of movement. He was a muscular man with a grave, square face and body, and square in every other way. He had started poor and single-handed was building a good spread by sheer dogged perserverence.

The girl smiled at him and threw on another steak. He was a friend, somebody reliable and easy to be with; she would have done more for Rand Wade than any other man she knew. Her only regret was that he loved her, but she doubted if any emotion deeply disturbed the rooted stolidness of his nature. Sometimes she wondered how she would feel toward him if he had ever shown the slightest sign of wildness or violence or emotion.

He sat down and made steeples of his blunt hands and studied them a space. He asked abruptly, "Was there a rider at a hard run by here at dawn?"

"Riding like the devil was on his tail," Bigbuck grunted around flapjacks.

"Why, that was Wild Curly Reagan," the girl told them.

Her face was suddenly animated with the stir of excitement he put through her and some of her feelings lay behind her voice. Wade darted her a flashing look and dropped his attention to his coffee, but her father looked up with piercing contemplation in his bleached gray eyes. She colored and her face stiffened and her

head went up a little as she turned from him.

"You ain't been seeing Curley private?" her pa asked bluntly.

He saw the color creep down the back of her smooth neck. "No," she answered tightly. "But he had always treated me with respect!"

Bigbuck shook his head. "He is jist wild, not bad, but he is getting trigger quick and glory hungry. He is going out of his way lately to find trouble."

Wade sat silent, expressing no opinion, sensing the girl's reaction to her father and her liking for Wild Curley, and containing his thoughts and feelings. The old man gave him a sharp look. "What about the dawn rider?"

"If it was Curley, it is all right, I reckon," Wade told him with restraint.

BIGBUCK looked thoughtful. "It ain't always far from wildness to badness when the wrong thing hits," he allowed. "And Curley's getting mighty tough."

"Aw, Pa!" the girl exclaimed. "What about the way he went smack out into that blizzard to find the two lost colts, and the time he walked fourteen miles across the desert to save his lamed pony?"

Her father's mouth touched with bleak humor at the corners. "That's animals—he ain't been that easy going or considerate of manflesh, Shirley. A month ago

he built trouble for no reason with the Sharp boys. Month before he shot up some poor dude down to Headgulch for getting drunk and dropping a card out of the deck."

He put his gaze directly upon Wade. "What do you think?"

"I figure it another man, Bigbuck," the rancher stated squarely. "But I ain't dead sure who yet, and don't aim to hint until I am certain about both the man and the outfit."

"Could be danged near anyone in town!" Bigbuck growled. "The town is getting mighty slick and tough under this new sheriff, Bangs."

Dust-thickened hoofbeats came in at a fast run from the trail, and rearing his blue roan by the doorway, Wild Curley Reagan showed his reckless face. He touched his hat to the girl and for that instant, the hardness and the wildness and the deviltry washed from his eyes and he looked at her with worship. Then his guards were dropped and he gave a wry grin and called in, "Almost caught me a mighty quiet prowling lobo this morning, but couldn't head him off."

Bigbuck pulled to his feet and Rand Wade followed him outside. Wild Curley stayed in the saddle, a small but compact man with rounded muscles, reckless of mouth and challenging of eye, but with a very gentle hand for horseflesh. He knuckled back his hat and let rivulets of



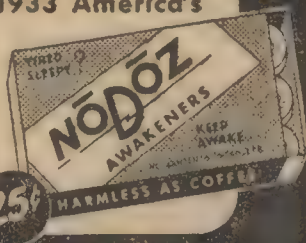
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trapped sweat cut down across his lean, moody face.

He said straightforwardly, "Bigbuck, I aim to catch and drill that hombre! But he is cagey, and I want permission to trap him on yore graze if need be."

"How do you know what he's up to?"

Curley snorted impatient scorn. "What does it matter if he is prowling? He is up to something and it is my bet he is birddog for the rustlers. In any case, if he is challenged, he has the same chance as me."

The old man scowled at the ground between his boots and took his first chew of the day. "Curley," he growled, "I have collected a few notches on my own gun. But I ain't never had part in shooting the wrong man, or in shooting up some drifting hombre before he had his chance to speak."

Curley Reagan's handsome face tightened. He swung his attention to Rand Wade. "How about your graze, Wade?" he asked with a hint of taunting mockery behind his soft drawl. "My grass runs into both yore spreads."

Rand Wade shook his head, meeting the other's mocking gaze steadily. "I will take care of my own or take the losses, Curley," he stated.

Curley placed his arms out straight against the saddle horn and pressed back against his shoulder sockets. He gave a low, careless laugh, but his eyes were hard and smoldering. "You ain't scared my shooting's bad?" he grunted. "Or are you thinking mebbe the friends of this hombre would even the score against the graze where he was salivated?"

Wade's jaws compressed. For an instant, he looked as if he meant to take offense, but then he stated evenly, "You asked for an answer and you got it. I'll do my own shooting on my own grass!"

Curley shrugged and looked over their heads at the girl standing in the doorway. "Can't get these men stirred up nohow!"

he said with regret. He looked speculative and then added, "This hombre is a big man with a big hoss. Two weeks back, Miss Shirley, a man trailed you behind the ridge clean from the rim down to the ford."

Rand Wade blanched, lifted his gaze sharply, and then turned red. "It was not the same man," he muttered awkwardly. "That was me trailing you, Shirley; there was a floodhead coming down the creek and I wanted to see you safely over."

She gave the stolid rancher a wide-eyed look of mixed surprise and startled humor. "Why, Rand," she murmured, then caught the wicked deviltry of Curley Reagan's gaze, and knew that he had said that simply to make Wade own up and simmer in embarrassment. She felt a surge of loyalty and indignation, but through it twisted threads of her own wild humor. She could not ice Curley as she had meant to; the secret laughter of her eyes betrayed her.

Bigbuck's brows beetled. "How did you latch onto this hombre's trail this morning?" he asked the man.

Curley gave a gesture. "My herd got restless around three o'clock and I took a foot prowl smelling for wolf. There wasn't any, but there was the spark of a shoe on rock up in the pass from my grass onto yore south pasture. I saddled up and followed and caught sign the rider was on a straight move across yore lower meadows, Bigbuck, headed in for town. I cut across to the trail and gave it all the speed I could, figuring mebbe to get in ahead of him or find a smell of fresh dust."

Bigbuck watched him steadily.

"There wasn't a dog's dust hanging anywhere in town. No riders at all come in until after sunup, and then they were the two Fretz boys and the sheriff from the other way."

"You say anything to Sheriff Bangs?" Bigbuck grunted.

Curley blasted a derisive snort. "Think I want to get framed or jumped?"

Bigbuck's face turned ironlike. "That is a damned dangerous statement."

Curley made a gesture. "All I know is what has happened since Bangs was elected. There ain't been no arrests of any outlaws, but two men who thought they knew something and reported it were found shot in the back!"

He spat and poked his hat down across the black mark cutting the whiteness of his forehead. "I'll stick to my own findings and my own shooting," he avowed.

"Stick to yore own grass to do it!" Bigbuck warned. "I would rather lose fifty cattle than have an innocent man killed on my place, Curley."

"Suit yoreself," Curley said. He gave Rand Wade another glance of scornful mockery. "I reckon you'd say the same?"

"Right to the dot," Rand nodded. "When I have come to certain judgement, then I will do my own acting."

"You are likely to be in boothill by then, friend!" Curley warned. He let his gaze slip over the girl with gentleness again, and nodding, swung his horse and moved out at a fast run.

THE three people stood rooted watching Curley dust out into the running sea of heating golden light and turn back townward at the fork. "He could have been the rider Easy saw," the old man speculated. "Men look bigger at night."

"I don't think I would care much to risk riding another man's grass at dawn," Wade said.

"Risk don't mean a damn to him when his mind is set on something," Bigbuck said, half to himself. "Like his old man in that, and except for his pa, I don't reckon I ever would have cleaned up this range in the fust place!"

He had not said that to sting nor as a comparison, but it started a comparative line of thought. It had held indirect respect for that part of Curley's character,

and he glanced momentarily at Rand Wade with an unspoken question in his eyes. Then he grunted, blew against his lips, and ambled off to the corral.

Wade stood motionless, flexing his quilt slowly in his hands. He said without turning toward the doorway, "I reckon yore pa might like to see more spark and flash in me, Shirley."

"Aw, Rand, he thinks yo're tops!" she told him. "But gee, it wouldn't hurt you none just to slap folks down when they get to crowding, just to let 'em know yo're alive!"

Rand Wade shook his head. He was not a man who could shut out his own faults or excuse his own weaknesses, even to himself. "No," he muttered, "yore pa was reared in the rawhide, six-gun school, and he was a good man, but all of that early wildness is still part of his thinking and his estimate of another man."

"A man still needs a little of that, doesn't he?" she asked carefully.

He turned to her then, his face sober, but beyond that showing nothing of his feelings nor his thoughts. "I have never had to shoot or kill a man, Shirley," he said levelly, "but if the time comes and I am convinced of the rightness and necessity, I will stand up to it."

She gave a gentle, understanding smile, not voicing the things that disturbed her. Wade was a good man, an honest man, but she just couldn't believe that half-wild toughness needed to master and hold a good graze was in him. He was more like a farmer in some ways, not yellow, but too slow to act, and too cautious. If that day of gunsmoke ever came, she had the dismal feeling he would still be debating the rightness of things in himself while somebody plugged him full of lead.

She did not want him to see her eyes and made figures on the door jamb with one finger. "I will have to go into town this morning to shop and to make arrangements with my cousin to stay out here."

He gave her an honest, searching look, restraining his own feelings in favor of the disturbance he felt in her. "Would you rather I did not hold you to your date for the dance tonight?"

"Land of Goshen, Rand!" she grimaced with a laugh. "What nicer man could I go with? That is, if you'll recollect to wear yore light boots!"

He gave a slow grin at her change of humor, and for a bare space that startled her but passed before she could be certain of it, he looked oddly boyish and full of hell.

"I'll pick you up in town then," he said, and shifted awkwardly with a quiet man's difficulty at parting, and then took his leave.

Her father ambled back and leaned against the side of the house watching Wade cut out toward the steep slope that ran up to his place. Wade rode a long-legged palomino he had caught and gentled himself, and the old man grunted, "That is a mighty fine hoss and mighty well trained."

The girl peered around the door curiously. "Doesn't Rand do everything carefully and well?"

"Hossflesh is different from other things," Bigbuck allowed. "Fust, it takes an instinct to pick out a critter like that. Second, that kind of hossflesh don't break well, or train ever, except when it wants to. That hoss knows something about Wade that I dunno and never would expect!"

"You think he is over-principled, pa?"

"I don't give a hoot about that," he growled. "But he is almighty cautious, I'm afraid!"

His wide lips compressed and he scowled out into the heat for a space. "But if it is all right with you," he added, "I will ask him to stay in the bunkhouse while I'm away. I don't figure he will protect my property—I'd have half a mind to ask Wild Curley to do that—but Wade will

be reliable and safe and you women will feel easier."

She gave a smile that was half ironic. Even her father thought of him that way, good and reliable and solid; but when it came down to elemental, primitive feelings of fight and possession, he would think of Curley in spite of that earlier suspicion of his honesty.

She turned back to her morning work, and put a washboiler of water on the stove for her bath. Day's heat built and thickened and the light began to haze and turn yellow and then brassy. Her father had left the work horse harnessed, and when she backed it into the buggy shafts, the sun was already sinking under a molten sky and the light was slashing off the landscape in a brilliant, lemon blaze.

These ranches controlled the mountain and the basin, the desert over the lower hills, and the border beyond that. Eastward lay the bench ranches, southward was impassable canyon, north reared Rand's snow-capped and passless ramparts, and west lay the sage and grass hills, with Curley's shelving graze that dropped off onto desert.

As she forked onto the dun thread of trail that skirted the shoulder of the mountain, the girl had a perfect map of the country on her mind. This was the key to the range, in spite of being farthest out from town, and now it struck her with mixed humor and shock that as the inner ranches must look at things, one of those three border ranches might be in cohorts with the rustlers, and only reporting losses to make things look right.

She caught that, too, the instant she came into the heat and smoking dust street of the Saturday-crowded town. Alarm lay behind the too jovial greetings and calls and horseplay like a strident sound. Suspicion crisscrossed the path of white light like an acid smell. Before she had even heard the news, she knew there had been other rustlings.

CHAPTER TWO

Colt Law

IT TURNED out worse, she learned at Leary's Drygoods. Tom Ketchum had been raided, cleaned and burned out, and his bullet-riddled body found in the boulder nest he had used for a fort in trying to hold the rustlers from getting through his outbound pass. Sign had cut in a slanting direction toward the border, in a direction that would take the rustlers across Teague and maybe Reagan graze as well.

Old Ma Marrow's voice came from the dim shadows far back along the counter, "I ain't said who I thought it was, but I will say this; it ain't more than forty years since this country was stocked on so-called wild cows, and there ain't a solitary ranch, big or little, hereabouts that bought and raised its own beef, except mebbe real lately."

Shirley's eyes fired and her fist clenched tight at the general inclusiveness of the statement. But Ma Marrow had been there, and she knew, and she was right; she had paid off three husbands to boothill in the learning. Bigbuck had been no different from his early times, except his fights had been more honest and forthright, maybe. It had been the code of the old times that a man took what he could hold. Still, even then, outside of range war, a man did not rustle or hunt "wild battle" among neighbors on his own range. But whoever had pulled these latest jobs had done just that, for any foreign, owl-hoot outfit would need the help of men knowing and living on that range.

She was angry and disturbed and swept up by the town's suspicion, and out of temper turned down Leary's offer of help with her packages. It was a higher and heavier pile than she had thought, but in her present mood she wasn't going to turn back for help, and on the first step

down from the stoop, she lurched a little and the pile toppled.

There was a starting rush of tapping heels from all sides, silenced suddenly by the hard pound and spur jangle of one pair, and a thick-voiced, forward chuckle, "Why, Miss Shirley, yo're too plumb pert and purty to be trying to tote that load!"

She didn't need to look to know it was Big Red Gaines, the only man she knew who could contrive to be insulting with his "Howdydeedo!" He was a bearded, boasting bully with brutality in his face, and a self-appreciated cunning that never left his narrow eyes. She looked frantically for other help, but knew it was useless; nobody was breasting Big Red's violent temper, and he had actually done nothing wrong to call him on, and there was no way for her not to accept his proffered help to her buggy.

These things ripped through her mind while he was stooping toward her packages. Upon them sifted other impressions: the Beaufort sisters reading her expression and grinning like coyotes; Danny White, small of build and peaceable of nature, sensing her feelings and turning away with a flush of shame that there was nothing he could do; faint surprise that Rand Wade was already in town. He was angling stolidly toward her, but with puzzled indecision of how to handle this. Mishandled, he knew this might turn Big Red's vicious pride on the Teagues, and Red's land adjoined Teague at a bottleneck on the south slope of the basin.

Then Wild Curley flung out of a bar. He squinted, wiping his mouth with a black-burned wrist, and in one look cut sign on the whole story, and without deliberation, swarmed off the stoop. He came swinging over with a long, fast stride, putting himself square between the girl and Big Red.

With lofty, mocking humor, he announced, "Here, let a fresh and younger man do that chore, Red! You must be

mighty tired, breaking up yore siesta after that long ride."

Red straightened, ugliness creasing up across his rough face, but there was a careful scrutiny in the look he put on Curley. "You ever see the time I couldn't outlift or outbreak you four to one?" he growled.

"Nope," Curley agreed carelessly and started to gather the bundles while he talked. "But I ain't never seen you try after a ride that gaunted a strong big hoss like yore Poky."

Big Red's hairy nostrils flared, but the expression of his eyes sank back behind barriers. "I ain't riding Poky," Red told him. "So where would you have seen him?"

Curly stood up with the bundles piled in his arms. His eyes filled with dancing devils across the top. "Mebbe out to yore rest pasture when I stopped by this morning, Red," he said.

"What the hell were you doing at my place when I wasn't home?" the other grated truculently.

"Calling," Curley told him tauntingly. "Jist calling neighbor-like, Red! But I'll call again some time when I can catch you."

He put the slightest inflection on the last words. The big man's back snapped stiff. His barrel chest arched and he sucked a great lungful of air and his eyes grew like red hot pokers in black ashes.

The girl took two boxes off Curley's pile and plopped them into Red's hands. "For a party that started to help out," she told them with a woman's defensive heat, "you boys are doing more worrying on a hoss than me!"

Truculence snapped between the two men, but her words broke the tension and they turned toward the buggy, half ashamed. They loaded her up, eyed one another, and as with silent agreement, touched their hats at the same moment and swung stiffly toward opposite bars.

The girl stood with a half wild smile of

excitement and mischief forming under the more conscious sobriety of her expression. Rand Wade arrived, but for the instant, she paid him no heed. Her gaze was thoughtful and her eyes murky black upon the limber, careless swing of Curley's shoulders. He would, she knew, jump into anything if it looked like excitement, but there had been a personal consideration in the way he did this, and it took physical courage to breast Red, and he had sensed the situation almost the instant he came through the batwing doors—and he had acted.

Rand Wade was standing quietly solidly, beside her, chuckling, taking this way of showing the town the show had been something impersonal and amusing. "Mebbe," he was saying, "you'd best put a peaceful work hoss like me in harness for yore toting before all yore purchases get busted."

She turned to him then with a woman's instant and complete change of thought and expression. "I didn't know you were in town yet," she murmured.

"Changed my mind and came early," he told her. "But you were started so I took the short trail."

That is odd, she paused to tell herself. *It is not like Rand to change his plans.* She studied him, found no key to the mystery she sought, and put the item aside for future consideration. "I could use some help," she admitted, "at Baile's."

She moved through town making purchases, greeting friends, exchanging gossip, but conscious all the time of the tautness behind smiles, the tight thoughts deep under laughter. Nobody really suspected Bigbuck Teague would be involved in this local rustling and killing directly. But younger men had dared growl lately at the unchallenged graze and water Bigbuck held beside his own, and Tom Ketchum, crowded by a growing herd, had been loudest and most careless. It would be a very easy thing for a range lord, annoyed

by comments, to close his eyes to the use being made of backtrails on unused property.

WORSE and more direct accusations were being thought and made against other folk, she knew, but that did not lessen the echo of Ma Marrow's acid reminder of their range heritage, nor the rancor that anyone would dare think of a Teague twice. They were thinking a lot harder and more pointedly about Wild Curley; but they were even more careful to keep thoughts in his direction covered. Nobody wanted a scrape of his six claws! About Rand Wade, the feeling was quite open. Few knew him well, and he was in a position to keep tabs on the herd without ever going off his hill, but nobody thought he had the grit or quickness for it. One rusty cattleman allowed, "Wade should have owned a feed house!"

But it was a funny thing that Wade still had managed to do better than some of the older and more characteristic ranchers. Maybe, as he often said, times were changing and it took a new breed. But in her heart she carried the echo of Wild Curley's reckless, challenging laughter.

She drove around to her cousin's to spend the high heat of the day and primp for the Stewart's barn party, and make arrangements for the week. Her father came in to ease his feet from the danged

clapwalks, so he claimed, but actually, she thought, to get away from the tumult of insinuations, gossips and suspicion.

He sat on the porch, having a rare thing, for him, a full quiet smoke of a cigar. From light to butt he did not speak a word, but then he shucked it out into the dust. He stated as an indisputable fact, "I have grown old. This range needs a new master!"

She had been moving in and out of the house, but now she came and sat on a footstool at his feet. "What is wrong with the Teague?" she asked.

"Things have gotten out of hand with Ketchum's killing, and when things get this way, it usually falls upon one man to straighten 'em. It should be the sheriff, but it never is in cow country; and it takes a man who can be everywhere and see everything at once and act fast and harsh when the time comes."

She grinned. "Nobody ever called you downright soft that I recollect!"

"They are calling me a heap of things under their breaths today," he scowled, "and I reckon they are right, or I wouldn't have taken that last rustling sitting on my hindside, even if I'd had to turn every man in the county upside down and dangle him on a rope with a smudge beneath him!"

"Pa!" she cried. "Folks don't act that way any more!"

"Mebbe that's the trouble!" he growled. "Dang, I wish that Curley Reagan had



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some of his old man's timber along with his wildness!"

"Couldn't Rand be some use?" she asked on a small voice.

He stared at her. "Rand Wade? For finding and cleaning out a wild bunch?" He gave a decisive snort. "Shirley, Rand is a real good man and a good breeder, and I could wish more of him, but I can't say it!"

She looked away, deeply conscious of her friendship for Rand, but feeling the same way. He had everything good and honest and gentle in him that there was, but not that spark of violence a man needed to give force and gain respect for better qualities.

After a space, her father pulled to his feet. "I will leave the house to start the drive before dawn and be back in nine days. You'll give the orders to Easy, but Rand will sleep in the bunkhouse, and eat whatever meals he wants with you."

She nodded and he gave her a weary smile, and moved out into the sunlight. She went upstairs and slept for a spell and bathed and had tea with her persimmon-mouthed cousin Mattie, and at five promptly, Rand Wade made his appearance to drive her to the barn party. Traffic had made an endless billow of dust drifting slowly off the red trail, and shouts and laughter racketed back and forth through the valley; and on the cooler heights of the mesa, the extra men were making muscles and putting on a running rodeo. There had been a killing last night and might be many before this night was over and almost every man was under some shade of suspicion. But not even that could dim the tough, robust love of play and fun that sprang from their vitality; they would play the game to the end, knowing that at any time they might have to fight or hang the man they played with.

The tempo of the crowd's mood caught and swept her, putting a high color into her cheeks and a wildness in her blood. That

was the way she felt, and she knew its danger, but didn't try to fight the thing that gripped her.

At that moment, Wild Curley Reagan went whooping by, slicked and dressed in silk fit to kill, his blue roan curried and gleaming like a star, even its hoofs varnished and designed. He saw her and raised a shrill trail call. A dozen calls came slamming back from all across the broken table, and in every buggy clean up the line, womenfolk poked out their heads and smiled and called to him.

But the bucking show had been for Shirley and she warmed with pleasure knowing it, and she watched sundown's streaming crimson and jonquil over all this excitement and feeling part of it. It was almost a shock to hear Rand's honest comment beside her, "I'll say one thing, if it was hosses Curley had wanted to hunt on my grass, he could camp there until he died!"

She swung her head to him, saying sharply, "You could be out there too, showing the boys up, Rand! I've seen times when you took a hoss places a man couldn't crawl!"

He looked surprised. "Why, Shirley," he murmured, "I said I'd drive you!"

She pulled her glance away with remorse that still did not quiet her feelings. "Well, you could have ridden alongside," she pointed out moodily.

He made a gesture with his hands. He was right simply because he had done something. Doggone, a woman could appreciate a man for that, but still hate him for it. She wished that just once in awhile he'd show that something really mattered to him.

They came into the crowded yard and calls were ricocheting like bullets from all sides. The barn was a blaze of smoky yellow light inside, with the fiddlers warming up under red, white and blue streamers. Dust smoke was so thick by the hitchracks a body could barely see, but she could hear

the hazing and joking of men beyond; and off to the other side of the glowing barbecue pits, heard the sharp prattle of women's gossip. There were a few cottonwoods and oaks to the side with planks laid out atop barrels, already groaning under food and growing heavier with each arrival's gifts.

CHAPTER THREE

Trail from Hell

SHE caught a glimpse of Curly through the dust and saw deviltry in his wink. But an instant later, she saw him wheel his horse and smash Coyote Tait against a post and pin him there cruelly while he leaned down to put some insult in his teeth. It caught her as sharply as if Rand Wade had done this, in spite of Coyote being known for a sneak and thief. The dust was heavy and the light was filling with purple shades, and it was hard to see Curley's expression in the brief space; but there was wicked, tight angle in his shoulders, and he gave off the feel of being hungry for an excuse to start some trouble. It was a side of him she hadn't seen, and it startled her, and she pondered whether this was the thing her father had interpreted as Curley's weakness.

This was high country with sundown blazing behind the blue-black mountains; almost instantly, dusk's velvet purple came down upon them. Lanterns, some faced with Indian masks and others daubed up in caricature, were strung above the tables. Starlight began to wash the sky and limn the hills, and by the time they moved inside to dance, it was already night.

Sheriff Bangs was there, watchful, inscrutable, cold as a glacier, and false as a deadfall with his even smile. His role was principally to see that guns were checked behind the counter put up for that purpose. There was a minor scuffle getting tanked-

up Charley Davis to part with a muzzle loading relic, but nothing more serious in the early evening.

Along about nine, the rougher and wilder bunch began to drift it, stiff of stance and surly of pride, eyes washed with hardness. Big Red came, a fiery giant, suddenly elegant and comical in a fancy flowered vest. He had been drinking and it had given him a boldness he scarcely needed.

He stood around a space, showing off to the boys, and giving unasked opinions on range matters to the older men. But he owned his own ranch and was a tolerable cattleman, and it gave him undeniable rights in this land of feudal caste. Talk veered, but always came back to rustling and Tom Ketchum's killing, and then to rustling again, with endless argument as to how the rustlers were able to keep an eye on the constantly shifted herds and riders, and know where their best bet lay; and most of all, how in hell they were getting those stolen critters out of the country. It was dangerous ground and men's tones began to edge and their eyes sharpen and go oblique. They would tone down then, feeling the explosive danger of their confused suspicions, knowing nothing they did not know before, but each time, more ready to believe anything hinted.

That was outside in the man's world by the corrals and the cider barrel. Inside the barn, grinniness could not withstand the hilarious vitality of the party. Women were panting and men flushed and everybody clumping like a stampede, and several times old man Stewart roared with pride, "If this danged barn can take this, she'll take any twister comes her way!"

Rand had danced his sociable round and joined the men's talk outside several times. He was welcomed, his opinions asked and given weight, but snagtoothed old Zeke Elder, who had tamed this country under Bigbuck, noted shrewdly that they listened to him on matters of graze or breeding

or building, but withdrew their interest when he took up any of the rougher things: stampedes, blizzards, floods, bronc busting and, particularly, gunplay. Even Big Red had broken their ice when he snorted flat into Rand Wade's face, "Yo're danged right you don't ever want to shoot the wrong man, Rand, and you've got to be downright careful because if you ever draw that gun and bead it, that bullet's going to come plumb yore way!"

There was a rich wave of laughter and Rand took it with quiet good nature, but it just about summed up their opinion of him in matters of violence and action. How a man of his nature hung onto the side of that pitched graze of his they had never figured. It was probably the most dangerous graze on that range, and might have tempted somebody like Curley, but the only way they could figure Rand up there was when they concluded he had put down roots all over and just moved along inside of them like sap.

Big Red strutted and felt pretty good with the honest laugh he brought. He had a sizable drink and sauntered inside. He had his own ranch and was a bachelor and there were girls who eyed him, but he stood arrogant and aloof until the end of a square, and then big and loud and drawing attention, moved over for next favor to Shirley Belle Teague.

He made a loud joke of it; he kind of fancied himself with the ladies. He told her heartily, "I figured I'd come collect taxes for not stomping that rattling little friend of yores in front of you today!"

Her excited flush cooled; she felt prickles of dislike race along her neck. But he was a neighbor and these things counted, particularly in dangerous times, and she managed a frigid smile and favored him. Rand came in as the fiddlers struck off and the dance sheriff sang out the calls. He caught her expression, and the quick, animal-like familiarity of Big Red's hold. He stood by a wall, lips com-

pressed, frowning slightly, but baffled for an excuse to butt in. Big Red gave no opportunity for outright affront, and although Rand Wade was Shirley's date, she had given him no right to take offense at minor things.

Rand claimed the next dance, meeting Red's challenging glare with stolid, unexcited flatness.

"I don't like him," Shirley murmured. "He's vain and fresh and I wouldn't trust him an inch—but he did nothing especially wrong, Rand."

"That makes it rather difficult," he said.

She gave a brittle, strung-up laugh. "Forget it!"

RED had another pair of drinks and came back in demanding another dance, laughing, but with arrogant danger behind his tone, and not needing words to set her flushing and affronted. Rand was watching, still puzzling what to do, but Curly drifted in, eyes bright and questing, and never took his eyes from Shirley after they settled. He knew what she was feeling, and why, and wicked deviltry settled on his lips as he decided how to settle it.

He was leaning against a post, indolent, mocking, wildness drifting out of him like an unpredictable wind. He signaled Lanky Grimms, a partner, and every time Big Red got to his end of the room, Wild Curley would be drawling in his soft, clear tones some reference to the location of Red's ranch and its nearness to the border passes, or the gaunted horse of Red's he'd seen, or wondering pointedly who the big rider on the big horse was on his graze last night, and wondering if he was acting as a decoy to draw off attention from the lower sections.

Red's fleshy neck was streaking pure crimson through the black burn at his collar, and veins were throbbing along his neck and temples. Curley's wicked grin stretched, and he winked assuringly at

Shirley over the man's shoulder. He gave her a signal of one finger, meaning one minute or figure in the dance, and had it well estimated.

Red came side shuffling down the arches with his partner, but dropped her hands cold at the end. His face went black and his eyes blazed as a curse exploded from him and he started like a bull for Curley. Curley never stiffened, never showed a sign of tension at Red's charge, but suddenly, at the last second, he was no longer leaning against the post. Red smashed into it like a stampede hitting a cliff, setting the high post twanging like a bow string, and blanking himself out momentarily where he stood.

Curley raised his eyebrows toward the sheriff and a half dozen of the more stalwart champions of manners. "Why, that big bag of wind wants to dance with me!" he mocked.

Sheriff Bangs shot him a wicked look. "Don't think I didn't catch what happened, Curley!"

"Like you caught that freshet circling town this morning?" Curley taunted.

Bangs stared at him with eyes like marbles, but no expression broke the hardness of his face. "Mebbe I'll take you outside one of these days too," he warned. "Right now, you go out with yore trouble and him!"

Curley laughed and swung and spur-dragged out. Bangs gave a signal, and the men piled Red out before he had fully caught his senses. He stood outside, head bowed, shaking it, blowing like a bull. His head cleared and he sucked a lungful of breath that popped the buttons on his vest.

His whole face suddenly filled with vicious, brutal cruelty. "Curley," he grated, "this is one time you forgot you ain't got a gun to make a man of you!"

Curley watched him carefully, but coolly. He liked this. He had a ring with a very small curved blade on the palm side, and he secretly snapped this open.

"A gun," he said, "would pop the wind out of you too fast, Red. I wouldn't want to stop any more of them meandering long rides you take nowhere when yo're minded."

Big Red gave a bull's roar of anger and came in charging. His braces were slashed and his pants down around his ankles before he had any idea what Curley was up to. Curley pulled down and out of his bone-breaking grasp then, and ducking free with a howling laugh, gave the giant a push with his open hand and let the man's enormous beefy weight do the hurting and crashing for him. Four times, Big Red started to struggle up, and each time Curley's dancing body weaved out of reach, but the lithe man sent him sprawling, tripping on his pants. They were torn now, and his elegant vest was ripped and bloody, and every man on the range was out there hooting derision at him, and Red's frustration grew so enormous that he blubbered.

He had friends and they stepped in now, even though their eyes were wet with laughing. Sheriff Bangs came over to take Red into town until he cooled. But before he left, Bangs turned to Wild Curley. "You made a fool of him, Curley, and I want to say one thing—he'll be within his rights any time he wants to call you out on this!"

"Just so its a front side call, sheriff!" Curley drawled. But there was a gloss, a slowly flaming challenge in his eyes, and they were not smiling. "And you can tell him I said one thing: to take his moonlight rides another way!"

The sheriff tautened. "You been doing a lot of loud talking, Curley! You think you saw this hombre last night?"

"At three this morning he was on my graze or I'm a midget!" Curley grunted.

Bangs made a show of hearing this; he made a show of thinking it over. "Well, I don't know what he was doing there, but one thing is certain," he snapped finally,

"If you saw him at three, that makes him about the only hombre on this range has a proven alibi so far that he wasn't over near Ketchums!"

Curley snagged the makings and gave the sheriff the cold eye. "Kind of gives me the same alibi then, don't it?" he demanded.

"For Ketchum's, yes," the sheriff nodded curtly. "But I might like to know why you were awake and riding range on a dead quiet night at three—considering yore range, that is." He laid a flat, bleak gaze on Wild Curley for a moment, then signaled Red's friends to gang the wallowing, berserk man to his horse, and left his insinuation about Curley shimmering in every head.

The circle of men stood awkward and unmoving as the sheriff's party moved out, not looking at Curley, not looking at each other. At the outskirts of the crowd, Rand Wade finally broke the silence. "Curley," he suggested, "why don't you answer what the sheriff said and put that black doubt to rest?"

Curley turned his head as if this were a sound he didn't know and sought to figure out. Then the deep flames in his eyes lapped high and filled them with sheer violence. He made a cutting gesture with the side of his hand and slammed down his cigarette.

"To hell with answering anything!" he snapped. "The only answer this range needs is lead!"

He swung his body in a quarter turn and stood with head thumbs on his belt, boots spread and planted, head hanging forward and eyes narrowed into the sheriff's settling dust. "No," he rasped in self denial. "There are some answers needed at that! For one, when did the two Fretz boys cotton so close to Big Red they got to go along? They sure ain't deputies, but I can think of some other things there ain't no doubt on!"

"Take it easy," Gooly Burke advised

from the light-slashed shadows. "Yo're steamed up and talking too much, Curley!"

"Yeah," Curley agreed on a hot breath. "Talk's about all that been done around here lately!" He swung on one high heel and made a clearing gesture of his hands. Unholy hell was blazing in his eyes. "Lemme corral my gun, boys! I'm through talking!"

THE women scattered from the doorway, but the girl caught him and held his hand unabashed upon the gun counter. "Curley," she pleaded. "Don't go gunning tonight!"

He turned and looked at her along his shoulder. He felt savage, and he showed it. "What would it mean to you? Yore pa wouldn't even have me in the house for coffee."

"Just tonight, Curley; I won't ask a second time!"

His lips curled in a mean and cynical laugh. "I never expected a fancy trick like that from you, Shirley!" he told her.

She shook her head desperately. "It's no trick! You take me home now to prove I really mean it!"

He murmured, "That is more than I need. But I will ride you home, Shirley."

Nobody heard them, but the women of the range were wise at signs and feelings, and already had guessed more than half the story. Rand stood in the doorway, face square, stolid, contained, showing no offense, nothing that would reflect discontent or disapproval of the girl. She came to him with Curley following, strapping on his gun, her lips a little open in readiness to explain.

He said, "That is all right; it is better if you feel this way," before she even spoke. "Mebbe," he added, "it is the best thing for the range."

She gave him heartfelt thanks for his understanding friendship.

He nodded over her shoulder at Curley and raised his voice. "I'm glad you didn't

forget her father wants to see you. If you'll take my horse from the stables in town for Shirley to ride, I'll bring Miss Mattie later and we'll pick up the buggy for our ride out."

"Well!" Mattie's sharp breath whistled clean across the room.

"Well yoreself, Mattie, and fall into it," Ma Marrow broke into the ripple of starting gossip. "It is not the first time a decent woman's company has saved trouble on this range." She gave every woman there a full, solid look. "And trouble this time could swamp any of yore men!"

The dance went on, but something had sapped the spirit from the party. Laughs fell into hollow silence and horseplay was no longer funny. The dancers went through movements listlessly, and the figures kept falling apart to cluster into groups and talk. Men began to worry about their cattle and women about getting home before a storm, and toward midnight, folk began to drift. Rand got his gun and Mattie collected her shawl and bonnet; she was the only one who'd thoroughly enjoyed the barn raising.

Old man Stewart found acid humor enough to ask his wife, "Think Rand's safe?" but could not find the will to chuckle.

They rode into town in the big two-horse Stevens rig, and found Shirley's buggy hitched in front of Mattie's. The moon was downing as they turned into Teagues', but he saw the solid block of shadow that divided as if with regret at their approach, and the two were still on the far side of the dark pond when he drew rein. He saw the girl's expression in the wash of starlight before the womenfolk turned in . . . the misty mixture of happiness and misery at parting and the promise of another time. He saw that inadvertently, not meaning to, and no change showed on his face.

He turned then and walked back to the corral with Wild Curley. The two stood

there having a smoke, knowing perfectly what was in the other's mind.

Curley said grittily, "I reckon if I was on the level, I'd not have brought her home that way."

"No," Rand told him with wry honesty, "it was for her to say."

Curley ground his fire between a caloused thumb and finger, cocking his head to steady the rancher against the paling light. "Yo're a qucer one, Wade," he grunted. "But I take back what I've been thinkin'. I don't reckon you are scared of anything."

Rand nodded.

"But this ain't going to make us friends," Curley added.

"No," Rand agreed bluntly, "we'll never be friends, Curley. And for the space of time her pa's away, I'll have to keep you off the place."

"Supposing, fr argument, I come anyway?"

"Then I'll have to shoot you on sight with a rifle for it is likely the only way I'd be sure of licking you, Curley."

Curley's eyes smoldered, then suddenly broke with wild silver lights, and his lips pulled back over his white teeth. Deep, rich chuckles came clean from his chest. "Rand," he grinned, "I'm damned if I don't think you mean that! If you live long enough, yo're like to surprise hell out of this range."

Rand looked toward the single light in the house soberly and shook his head. "No," he said, "I have something to do here, but when it is done, I will be along my trail."

He swung his gaze to Curley, met his look forth-rightly, then nodded and swung up into his saddle. He turned then. "Don't make me pull a rifle, Curley," he said and lifted his reins.

"Not me," Curley chuckled after him, swinging aboard his own leather. "Yore jist the kind of hombre would forget to miss!"

By DEAN OWEN



Hagen's gun flashed in the sunlight. "Put 'em down!" he shouted.

CHAPTER ONE

Blood Victory

IN THE thick California night the three of them held their horses alongside the Callan Great Store, watching the flow of customers diminish as the hours stretched toward midnight. Jeremy Lashton, the youngest of the trio, was also the most nervous. He was a tall, tow-headed man in new levis and boots with an old .44 his uncle had given him bulging

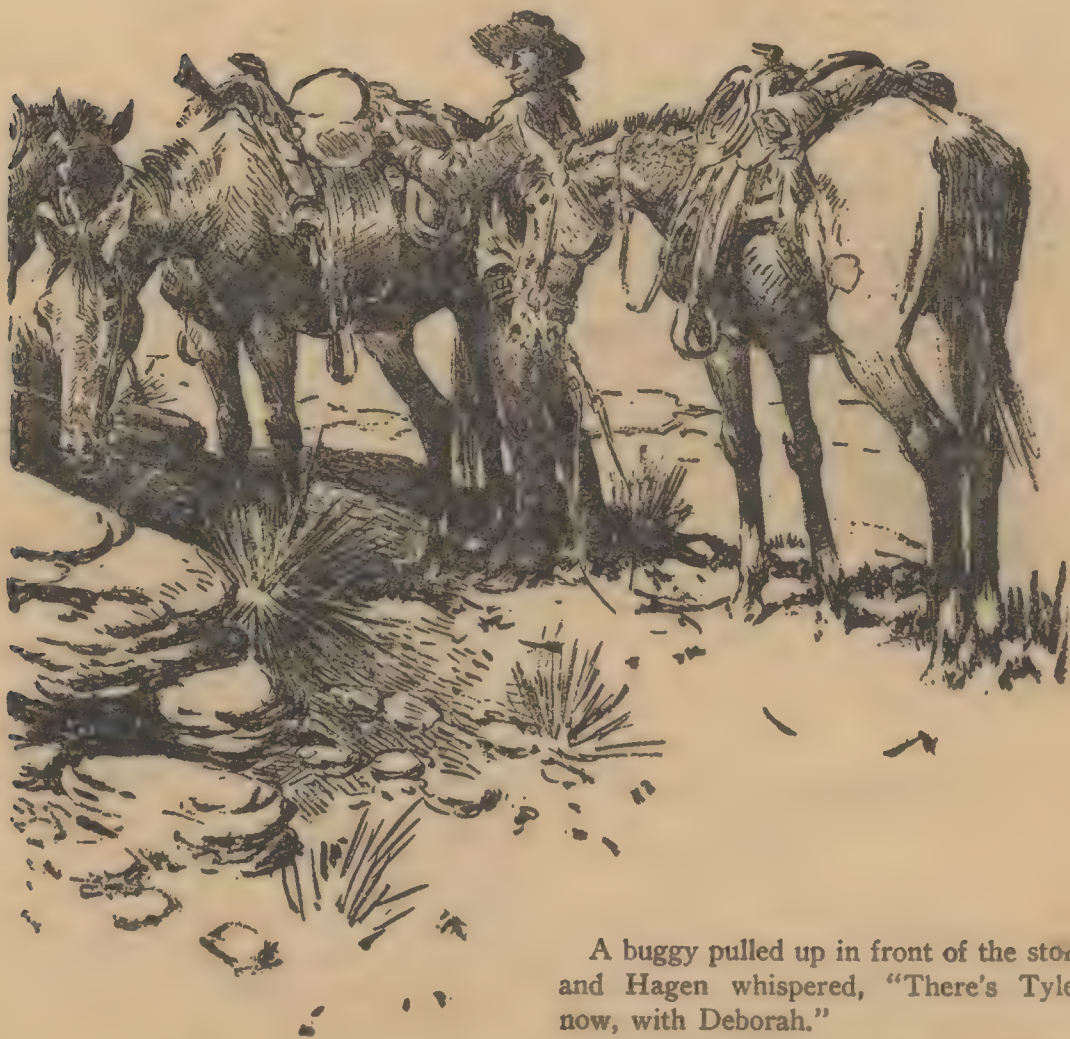
from a belt. In one short month Jeremy had buried his father, turned their Los Angeles drygoods store over to the creditors and come here to San Bernardino to learn ranching from his uncle. Instead he was learning the ways of violence.

Jeremy's uncle, Brad Lashton, a bulky, thick-necked man, staggered when he walked to the alley mouth and peered at the entrance of the Callan Store. "Tyler Callan ain't comin'," he said.

Tom Hagen said in his snarling voice,

*There's just one thing wrong with where you're headin',
stranger—you gotta ride back the way you came when you
reach—*

A MITE SOUTH OF HELL



"He'll spend most of the night workin' on the books. Tomorrow's the first of the month. He'll come all right."

Jeremy felt sweat on his palms. This business with the Callans was all right, he assured himself, but he wished it were over and done with.

A buggy pulled up in front of the store and Hagen whispered, "There's Tyler now, with Deborah."

A short, stocky man got out of the buggy and entered the big mercantile. The buggy wheeled around and started back up the street. When it drew abreast of the alley, Tom Hagen stepped onto the deserted walk and called the woman's name.

The buggy halted. Deborah said, "Be

careful, Tom. Tyler's threatened to kill you."

Hagen said, "I know all that. He sent a note out to the ranch. But instead of meetin' him tomorrow when he'll have the rest of the Callan tribe around, I'll catch him tonight—alone."

The woman laughed nervously. "You'll come to me when it's over?"

Hagen promised and the buggy rolled on up the deserted street. Jeremy felt a little sorry for the woman for he knew Hagen had no intention of seeing her again. They were pulling out for Mexico, leaving the sorry Lashton ranch for the bank. There was gold to be had in Mexico, and Hagen knew mining.

Jeremy didn't like the idea of Hagen stealing Tyler Callan's sweetheart, but if a Callan couldn't hold his woman he deserved to lose her.

Brad Lashton took a last drink from the bottle he had been nursing and tossed it into the alley dust. He put a big hand on Jeremy's shoulder. "I been thinkin'," he said. "You go wait for us at the Junction."

Hagen said, "He's a Lashton, ain't he?"

Brad blinked his eyes and Jeremy said, "It's my fight, too." But there was fear in his voice.

Although he hated the green-eyed Tom Hagen, he owed the man his life. Two days before, a pair of Callans had tried to beat Jeremy's brains out, and probably would have succeeded had it not been for Hagen's sudden and violent intervention. Hagen was a sort of shirt-tail kin, having been married to Jeremy's aunt.

Hagen said, "The Lashtons and the Callans been feudin' too long for Jeremy to keep out of it now."

Before the low-voiced discussion could continue the door of the Callan Great Store opened. A thin, gray-haired man stood in the opening a moment.

"Don't work too late, Tyler," he said to someone inside, and came outside.

It was Silas Callan, eldest of the Callan tribe. Jeremy couldn't help but remember the old man's words the first day he had arrived in San Bernardino only a week before.

"You're a young man and you've had no part in this senseless feud. Don't stay in San Bernardino. Get out or risk being hanged as a horse thief along with your uncle and Tom Hagen."

Hagen was watching Jeremy, seeming to read what went on in his mind. He said, "It was Silas Callan's brother that murdered your grandfather Eber and started the feud."

Silas Callan disappeared up the street, unaware of the three who lurked beside the store.

Lamplight dimmed in the store. Just as they started to move onto the walk, a man came out of the shadows. He was short and fat and wore a calfskin vest. He said, "Got a match, stranger?"

Hagen fished one out of his pocket. The man weaved a little when he struck the match and touched the flame to a cigarette. In the brief match glow he saw their faces and Hagen cursed under his breath, and started to draw his gun. Then the man in the calfskin vest thanked them and went on down the street, singing softly.

Brad sighed. "That settles it, Jeremy. You go wait for us at the Junction."

This time Hagen made no protest and Jeremy was glad to get his horse and ride away from them, for his stomach muscles had begun to flutter.

The bad blood that lay between the Lashtons and the Callans had flowed freely since '50 when Eber Lashton had staked a claim on the American River. A Callan had disputed the boundary and Eber Lashton was killed. Two Callans paid for the deed with their lives. There had been other exchanges in the intervening years. Then Brad Lashton had started ranching in San Bernardino and before long the Callans had moved in and opened

their store. Some of the Callans took up land and started a horse ranch west of town. /

A month before Jeremy arrived, Brad and Hagen had been arrested for stealing Callan horses, but a jury had turned them loose.

As he waited in the darkness at the junction, Jeremy couldn't help but think that some of the present trouble was over the woman, Deborah. Hardly a night had gone by that Hagen hadn't come home with face powder on his vest.

The shots came from the direction of town, three of them flat and ugly. He waited, hardly daring to breath until he saw the two riders veering toward him out of the night and heard Brad's voice calling, "Ride, Jeremy! Hit leather!"

They made for the hills, pushing their horses. An hour later they slowed and Jeremy learned that Tyler Callan was dead.

"Hagen tried to make Tyler Callan see how things was," Brad said, groping for words, "that there wasn't no use in fightin' over a woman. He pulled a gun and Hagen killed him."

Then brad tilted his head back and took a long pull at a fresh bottle as if to get the taste out of his mouth.

For the next two days they traveled south, keeping off the main trails. On the third day they got an exchange of horses from a hard-eyed man who ran a

small ranch in the hills. Then they were off again, their beards foul from the dust.

At nightfall they were on a ridge above Grover's Crossing and Hagen told Jeremy to ride in and get some grub, for he wasn't known as a Lashton in these parts.

Jeremy rode down the slant toward the single false-fronted building that comprised Grover's Crossing. There was an intense loyalty in Jeremy toward his kin, but that loyalty was being stretched to the breaking point.

Saddle horses lined the rack in front of the store, lamp glow from the windows washing over their sweaty, dusty hides. He walked his horse to the rear of the building and dismounted, conscious that he trembled. A back window gave him a good view of the interior. Dim voices came from the big room and once he caught the name "Lashton."

Gray-haired Silas Callan was talking to the storekeeper; his stern features showed the strain of hard riding. With him were Reb and Hardy Callan, the pair who had tried to whip Jeremy in San Bernardino. Their faces still bore the marks of Hagen's gun barrel. Fully a dozen men were in the store, Callans or their friends.

Jeremy's throat tightened and he started for his horse. A man was coming around a corner of the building and they came together head-on. The stranger gasped and said, "What the hell," and started a hand for his gun.

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Instinctively Jeremy's .44 lifted and the barrel took the man on his hat crown. The man sagged to his knees, dazed but not out. By the time Jeremy was in the saddle the man had started to yell. Jeremy made the brush but the yard had filled with men and gunfire lifted its raucous voice to the night sky.

Lead searched but did not find him and finally he outrode their guns and came to the place where Brad and Hagen waited; they were all mounted, warned by the firing.

Darkness was the only thing that saved them for the Callans rode hard. By dawn Hagen had led them down onto the flat desolation of the desert.

As the long hours wore on realization came to Jeremy Lashton that he had been a fool in siding his uncle and Hagen; there was no glory in dying at the end of a rope or with your body torn to pieces by Callan guns. But it was too late to back out now. He recalled his father's death-bed warning, "Stay away from Brad. He's my brother but he's no good. The Lashton-Callan feud won't ever stop as long as he's alive."

But Jeremy believed that at twenty-two a man should make his own decisions, and there was something romantic about the bulky, hard-drinking uncle. Kin folks had to stick together against the cursed Callans, Jeremy had believed.

Now, as he looked back over his shoulder, he could always see a plume of yellow dust in their wake—the Callans.

There was youth in Jeremy and despite being unused to the saddle he bore up as well as his companions. Brad became morose now that his whiskey had worn off and he was without a drink. Hagen cursed the heat and became a gaunt, flaming-eyed man in the saddle.

When they paused for rest in the shade of a rock outcropping, Hagen flung himself to the ground. Jeremy loosened cinches. His legs were stiff, his blue shirt

ringed like frost under the arms from salty sweat.

He reached for Hagen's heavy saddle bags, intending to throw them to the ground and give the horse a chance to rest.

Hagen's gun flashed in the sunlight. "Put 'em down!" he shouted crazily. "Don't ever touch them bags again or I'll kill you!"

The heat and the saddle weariness and the constant threat of death had put a new hardness in Jeremy Lashton.

He stared into Hagen's glittering eyes and said, "What's in those bags you don't want me to see?"

But Hagen made no reply.

Then they were in the saddle again, zig-zagging toward the border. The next time Jeremy looked for Callan dust he saw a ridge of dark clouds on the horizon. By mid-afternoon the sudden desert storm struck them.

"We got a chance!" Hagen yelled into the teeth of the gale. "If we can make the hills the sand'll cover our tracks!"

Ride and pray, that's all they could do, heads down, kerchiefs across their faces, their tired horses floundering. Then, after what seemed like hours, they were in the hills.

Without a thought for the pursuers, they flung themselves to the ground in utter exhaustion.

At dawn they looked down onto the desert, seeing a yellow plume of dust moving toward the border.

Hagen laughed till the tears ran down his dusty cheeks. "The dirty sons!" he cried. "We've beat the Callans!"

Brad shook his head. "The Callans got nothin' but time. They'll find us." He scowled at Jeremy. "I shouldn't ever have let you get mixed up with us."

Hagen snarled, "He's a Lashton, ain't he? Jeremy, you ain't sorry you sided your kin, are you?"

"My kin!" Jeremy said contemptuously.

TWO years before Hagen had worked a claim with a man named Denbolt up beyond the mountain town of Julian. Now Hagen proposed they head that way. Denbolt owned horses and they'd get hold of them, one way or another.

Jeremy let them plan. On the morrow he intended to leave them and cross the mountains to the coast. A man could get a ship out of San Diego. The Callans would never think of looking for a Lash-ton in China. Brad and Hagen could go to the devil, kin or no kin.

The Denbolt place was set at the end of a lonely road screened by pines. A hundred yards from the house a mine tunnel scarred a hillside. Between the house and the tunnel they saw a shed and a corral, and what was most important, horses.

When they pulled up at the house and dismounted, the door opened and two girls came to the porch and stared at them.

"I'm lookin' for Sam Denbolt," Hagen said, sweeping off his hat with a grin. "Reckon you must be the two daughters he was always talkin' about."

The small girl held a rifle, her dark eyes full of suspicion. She was dressed in boys' levis and boots. Her checked shirt was unbuttoned and when she saw Hagen's green eyes watching her, she blushed and buttoned the shirt with one hand, holding the rifle in the other.

"My father has—has gone to town," she said tensely.

The other girl was older and taller. Her skin was milk-white and she had lazy, amber-colored eyes and a bold mouth. She kept watching Hagen, running her hands along her thighs, smoothing the folds of a yellow dress that clung to every curve and hollow of her.

Hagen said, "I worked the claim with Denbolt." He jerked a thumb at the mine tunnel. "Name's Hagen. This here is Brad Lashton and his nephew, Jeremy."

The two girls argued on the porch. The tall one's name was Maybelle, the dark-eyed one Netta, and from the drift of talk Jeremy learned they had just come from San Francisco to pay their father a visit at this lonely mine.

Brad let his weight sag to a porch step. "Ma'am, we're tuckered out. When'll Denbolt be back?"

Netta said, "He'll be back day after tomorrow."

Jeremy caught the note of stress in her voice. He felt sorry for her and said, "We best be ridin'."

She turned her gaze on him, weighing him. In a moment her mouth relaxed but she did not put aside the rifle. She said, addressing her words to Jeremy, "You can have the horses on one condition." Her lips began to tremble. "There's been a cave-in at the tunnel. Clean it out and you can have the horses and be on your way."

It was a ridiculous proposition and Jeremy was afraid Hagen would take her rifle and make off with the horses anyhow. But Hagen was giving her a shrewd appraisal with his green eyes. Then he glanced at Maybelle and grinned.

"We'll take a look at the tunnel," he said.

As they walked up the slant Brad said, "We already got our necks in a noose on account of one woman."

They found a lantern in the shed and used its light to explore the tunnel. Netta had not been exaggerating when she talked of a cave-in. It was filled with boulders and splintered shoring. The ceiling had fallen and exposed a section of glistening rock; Hagen took a long time staring at this, shifting the lantern at different angles, digging with his fingernails as he stood on the pile of boulders.

"Won't be much of a job," he said when they were outside. "Brad, you and Jeremy cut timber for shoring. I'll clean out the tunnel."

Jeremy said suspiciously, "Working in

the tunnel is the most dangerous part of the job."

Hagen grinned. "I've done this work before. I'll have a better chance of staying alive than you or Brad."

After they had cared for the horses and returned to the house they saw that a table had been set for them on the porch. Savory odors of coffee and stew brought them on the run.

From the door, Netta said, "You can sleep in the shed. And don't try to get into the house, because Dad might come back any time."

The door slammed and they could hear a bar clatter into place.

Hagen helped himself to the stew, grinning. "I got me a hunch," he said under his breath, "that Sam Denbolt ain't comin' back—ever."

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Proof

THAT night Hagen took his saddlebags and a shovel and disappeared for half an hour. When he returned to the shed where they slept his boots were covered with fresh dirt. He tossed his empty saddlebags into a corner of the shed, yawned and rolled up in his blankets.

At sunup they bathed in the creek beyond the house and heated water over a small fire. Then they took turns with a razor.

Their breakfast was waiting for them on the porch. Netta still wore her levis, looking tanned and scrubbed. She had braided a red ribbon into her dark hair. Maybelle wore a frilly starched dress that rustled when she leaned close to pour Hagen's coffee. He whispered something in her ear that brought a flush to her cheeks, but there was no anger in her eyes.

That morning they started to work. While Hagen cleared the tunnel with a push-car, Brad and Jeremy cut timber

with an old cross-cut saw they found in the shed. Brad got the whiskey sweats after an hour and had to rest, so Jeremy took an ax and split logs.

Brad stared moodily at a gnarled oak down near the road and said, "A fine tree for a hangin'."

Jeremy glanced at the tree and swallowed in a dry throat. Netta came down from the house and stood watching him work. Occasionally she would glance at the tunnel mouth when Hagen came to dump a load of rock. She seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

There was tension at the corners of her soft mouth. A pleasant giddiness smothered Jeremy and he found himself wondering how she would look in a dress. Some of his faded dreams returned, but he put them resolutely aside; he had thrown in with his renegade kin and there was no escaping the outlaw brand they had put on him. So he became gruff with her when she tried to talk, and presently hurt deepened in her dark eyes and she left.

An hour later, Hagen's shout brought Jeremy racing up the slant to the tunnel. Even in the gloom of the cavern he could see what Hagen had partially uncovered from the pile of fallen rock.

Hagen wiped a forearm across his sweaty face. "I told you Denbolt wasn't ever comin' back," he said. "The girls knew he was in here all along, I figure."

There wasn't much you could tell about Denbolt except that he had been gray-haired. Jeremy felt that he was going to be sick.

A footstep at the tunnel entrance brought him spinning around. It was Netta and he shielded her from the gruesome find, gently pushing her out into the sunshine.

For an instant she struggled. Then the fight left her and she slumped against him. His arms went around her.

"You found him," she sobbed. "I was afraid this was what had happened."

In jerky sentences she told how she and Maybelle had been driven here from Julian when their father failed to meet the stage. The man who had brought them said Sam Denbolt had probably gone after a deer. As the hours wore on, Netta was about to hitch up the team to the wagon and go into town and get help to clear the tunnel and see if her father had been trapped by the tunnel cave-in. At that moment Jeremy and the others had arrived.

Maybelle stood outside the tunnel nervously twirling a parasol over her bare shoulder. Tears made a faint shine in her amber-colored eyes. Hagen came out of the tunnel to put a comforting arm around her waist and picked up Netta's rifle from the ground. The devil was in his green eyes.

Netta brushed tears from her eyes. "I'll trade you the horses like I said, Jeremy, if you'll help me bury Dad."

Jeremy nodded.

Brad said, "I'm right sorry about your pa."

Maybelle wiped her eyes daintily with a lace-edged handkerchief, then frowned at the smear of dirt on her white dress where Hagen had put his sweaty arm.

They buried the old man at sundown.

That evening there was no table set on the porch. The front door was open and Maybelle beckoned them in. She wore an apron and there was a smudge of flour on

one cheek. However, Netta was doing all the cooking.

The place was comfortable with its stone fireplace, the Indian rugs on the floor and the horsehair soft and easy chair. The kitchen was at one end of the long room, two doors leading to bedrooms at the opposite end. Netta explained sadly that their father had built the house for them, thinking the mine would be a success. When the gold boom at Julian petered out he sent them to live with relatives in San Francisco.

Halfway through the meal Hagen looked up from his plate to stare at Netta. "How come you invited us in?" he asked suddenly. "I thought you was afraid."

Netta's cheeks, already flushed from the heat of the big wood stove, deepened in color. "I'm not afraid—now," she said and gave Jeremy a shy smile.

Jeremy felt his heart begin to pound, but a sharp edge of fear was in him, too, for he couldn't help but notice the sly smile on Tom Hagen's lips.

In his clumsy way, Brad tried to make conversation, asking why the girls had suddenly decided to visit their father. Netta said Sam Denbolt had written that he had something important to discuss.

"And we came right away," Maybelle put in. "But we never did get a chance to learn what it was. If he'd only have quit spending his money on that old mine he'd be here now."

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Netta gave her a sharp glance.

Later, when the dishes were done, Hagen said, "I seen a wagon out back. Want to go ridin', Maybelle?"

The blonde girl's eyes began to shine. When she started for the door, Netta said, "It's better to do your riding by daylight."

Maybelle's red mouth tightened. "I'm tired of having you tell me what to do!" she flared.

Netta said firmly, "You're not leaving this house."

There was something determined about Netta. Maybelle flounced off to her room and slammed the door. Hagen gave Netta a malicious grin and left the house.

THAT night when he rolled up in his blankets down at the shed, Jeremy kept his gun at his side. Somehow he sensed that Hagen was playing a shrewd game and he was determined that no harm would come to Netta.

At dawn Jeremy awoke with a start to find that sometime during the night Hagen had slipped out. He got Brad awake. They put on their pants and went to look for Hagen. Halfway across the yard Jeremy looked for the wagon he had seen the night before. It was gone.

The house door banged and Netta came rushing across the yard, her rifle under her arm.

"Maybelle's gone!" she cried, her dark eyes flashing. She flung up her rifle. "If you hadn't brought that awful man here this wouldn't have happened. Now clear out, both of you!"

Suddenly tears of anger and humiliation spilled across her cheeks. She whirled and ran back to the house. They could hear the bar clatter into place as she locked the door against them.

Jeremy started for the corral. "I'm going to kill Hagen," he said.

Brad caught his arm. "You'll only get your head shot off and Maybelle ain't

worth it. Hagen's up to somethin' and he hasn't showed his hole card yet. They'll be back. You'll see. Maybelle would likely go away with any man. If it hadn't been Hagen it'd been the next fella who came along and give her a smile."

Jeremy pulled free of his uncle's grasp and again started for the horses.

Brad said, "You better think twice about leavin' a gal like Netta alone up here in the mountains."

That did it. Brad was right, this time at least.

There was some jerky in his saddle bags and he went into the shed to get it, for Netta would cook them no breakfast this morning.

That was when he spied Hagen's empty saddlebags on the floor. Curiously he probed around inside the pouch. This was the first time he had touched them since Hagen had threatened to kill him back on the desert.

Brad said from the door, "I'd leave 'em alone if I was you."

Jeremy ignored his bulky uncle and opened the bags. A twenty dollar gold piece rolled out onto the floor, together with a wadded-up piece of paper.

Jeremy said, "Hagen must've forgot to bury this one."

He smoothed out the piece of paper, staring at the printing and the column of figures.

CALLAN GREAT STORE SAN BERNARDINO

Cash on hand in safe, April 2:

McLeish	\$320.00
Bolinger	150.00
Samson	428.00
Leimeyer	192.00

\$1090.00

"April second is the day we left San Bernardino," Jeremy said coldly. "This looks to me like a list of the money the Callans were keeping for their friends in the store safe."

"Now wait a minute, Jeremy."

Jeremy hurled the twenty dollar gold piece out the door and turned on his uncle. "That was the idea all along, wasn't it?" he cried. "Kill Tyler Callan and rob the Callan safe!"

Brad shifted his feet nervously. "I was purty drunk. It was all Hagen's idea."

Jeremy gave a harsh laugh. "When I was a kid and you'd come to Los Angeles all dandied up and smelling of cologne water I thought you were a great man. So different from my father who was satisfied to run a store and forget he belonged to the feuding Lashton clan. Now I know why he had so little use for you, his own brother."

Brad lifted heavy hands in protest. "That ain't no way to talk to your uncle."

"I've had time to think, Brad," Jeremy went on grimly. "Reb and Hardy Callan tried to whip me because to them every Lashton in San Bernardino was a horse-thief. Did you and Hagen steal Callan horses?"

"The jury turned us loose."

"You and Hagen are old hands at the game. Of course there was no evidence."

Brad's face was a mask of agony when he said, "You got no right to stick up for the Callans. It was a Callan that murdered grandfather Eber."

"Thirty years ago," Jeremy snapped.

"It was Hagen that kept Reb and Hardy Callan from killin' you. It was on account of what Hagen done to them that Tyler Callan—"

Jeremy's fist caught Brad on his thick chest and drove him against the shed wall. Brad stood there blinking at him.

Jeremy said, "I used to think Deborah was Tyler Callan's sweetheart. Now I'm beginning to wonder if she wasn't his wife."

The truth was there in Brad's eyes and he shuffled for the door. "I'll make it up to you somehow, Jeremy."

His voice trailed off. Jeremy turned to see what his uncle was staring at. Netta

stood outside the door, her eyes very grave. "I've fixed your breakfast," she said, and walked slowly back toward the house.

WHEN breakfast was over Jeremy waited until Brad went outside and Netta was stacking the dishes. He stood beside her and the scent of her black hair stirred his blood.

"You know all about me now," he said, reminding her of what she had overheard at the shed. "If you still want us to go, just say so."

Her dark eyes searched his face. "I'm sorry for losing my temper," she said. "Whatever happened to Maybelle is not your fault. I shouldn't care, but it makes me feel cheap, as if I'm as bad."

"You're not like her," he said sharply. "You wouldn't go away with a man."

She stood there, her lips relaxed, eyes half closed. The sweet smell of her was in him and suddenly his arms lifted and she waited for him. But in that instant he remembered the Callans.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and left the house. The rest of that day he toyed with the idea of returning to San Bernardino and facing Silas Callan to protest his innocence. But in the end he discarded it for he knew that Callans would kill him before he could open his mouth.

That night Tom Hagen came driving into the yard, Maybelle on the wagon seat beside him. Netta came down from the house, tension and anger on her small, dark face. Jeremy and Brad walked up from the shed.

For a long moment nobody said anything, then Maybelle giggled nervously. Hagen grinned and said, "Ain't you glad we're back?"

Jeremy walked slowly up to the wagon. "There's nothing I can do about you and Maybelle," he said, "but you've made Netta feel cheap and you're going to pay for it."

Hagen was in the act of wrapping the lines around the brake handle when Jeremy suddenly pulled him out of the wagon.

Maybelle screamed as Hagen lit on hands and knees, shaking his head from side to side. Then he suddenly made a grab for the gun at his belt. Jeremy, standing at his side, hit him on the temple. Hagen was flung over on his back by the blow. He tried to reach his fallen gun and Jeremy put his foot on it. He was reaching for Hagen's thick hair when Brad suddenly flung himself against him.

"You fool!" Brad yelled. "Maybelle's been tryin' to tell you they're married!"

Jeremy picked himself up, seeing the thick gold ring on Maybelle's finger, conscious now that she had been shouting at him from the moment he pulled Hagen from the wagon.

Tension ran out of him and his knees began to tremble as he saw that Hagen had recovered his gun and had risen to his feet. The green-eyed man stood there glaring, his heavy breathing the only sound in the sudden silence.

Brad cried, "Don't do it, Hagen! He's only a kid! He didn't mean nothin'!"

Jeremy waited, expecting to feel the ripping smash of lead. He saw Netta, frozen into immobility.

Then Hagen laughed and holstered his gun and brushed the dirt off his clothes. "I'm lettin' it ride, Jeremy," he said, "this one time."

Netta put her arms around her sister. "I'm so very glad for you," she said, and cast a worried glance at Hagen. "If this is really what you want."

When the girls had moved off to the house, Hagen said, "Remember what I said, Jeremy. I aim to forget what you done tonight because I need you. Next time it will be different." He tapped the butt of his gun suggestively and followed the girls to the house.

When Jeremy forked hay for the horses,

Brad said, "Don't ever cross Hagen again. He could've killed you had he wanted to, and it ain't like him not to want to."

Netta cooked up a wedding supper while Maybelle chatted about the time they'd had in Julian. They were going to St. Louis for their real honeymoon, Maybelle confided, just as soon as Tom Hagen concluded some business.

Hagen had brought out whiskey from town and Brad was already into it, bragging what he'd do if the Callans came here. Jeremy had to shut him up so the girls wouldn't hear.

That night when Jeremy and Brad were about to roll up in their blankets down at the shed, Hagen came in and tossed a canvas sack on the floor. He stood there grinning while Brad fished out two stones about the size of hen's eggs. Brad studied the rocks by the light of a lantern on the floor.

Then he whistled under his breath and said excitedly, "Where'd you get this, Hagen?"

Hagen jerked a thumb toward the mine tunnel. "Denbolt was huntin' for this vein when he brought the ceiling down on him. Assayer at Julian says it looks good."

Brad said, "No wonder Denbolt sent for his daughters to come a-runnin'."

Jeremy said, "It isn't your mine, Hagen. It belongs to the girls."

"And I married one of them." Hagen's smile was flat and ugly, and he stood there, his hand on his gun.

Brad took a drink from his bottle and chuckled. "We're goin' to be rich and we'll go to Mexico in style."

Disgusted, Jeremy walked down to the corral, wondering what his next move should be. For Hagen's actions since coming here were suddenly clarified. He couldn't stand by and let Hagen steal the mine. And he wasn't fooled by Hagen's eagerness to forget the unpleasantness which lay between them. As soon as his usefulness was over, Hagen would call for

a showdown. There was no doubt of it.

Netta must have seen the glow of his cigarette for she came down from the house. For a moment she said nothing. Then she touched his arm. "Maybelle told me about the mine," she said in a troubled voice. "Do you think that was why Hagen married her?"

"Of course not," Jeremy said quickly, not wishing to give her further cause for worry.

Netta said, "I'm afraid of Hagen. There's something evil about him."

Silence ran between them for a moment broken only by small night sounds and the stomp of restless horses in the corral.

"You've hardly looked at me," she said softly, "not since the other morning in the kitchen. I wanted you to kiss me. Why didn't you?"

Her plain-spoken boldness brought hot blood to his cheeks and that giddy feeling returned. But there was steel in his voice when he said, "You know what I am and how I'll have to live out my days. There's no place in my life for a woman."

"Somehow, I'll make you change your mind," she said, and walked back to the house.

CHAPTER THREE

Boothill Boomerang

BRAD and Hagen grew surly and restless because the ore wasn't panning out as they had expected. By the end of the fifth day they saddled up and rode into Julian, risking a run-in with the local law who might have their pictures for that San Bernardino affair. They came home at dawn, roaring drunk. Maybelle sulked because Hagen had not taken her with him and was sharp-tongued and spiteful. Hagen laughed and said a husband needed a night out once in a while. Hagen and Brad slept all day.

That night when Jeremy entered the

house for supper his eyes opened wide when he saw that Netta wore a bright print dress which effectively showed off her figure. Her dark eyes began to shine when she saw Jeremy.

"I made it myself," she said. "I told you I'd make you change your mind."

After supper Hagen gave Brad and Jeremy the sign and they followed him outside. It was pitch dark down by the shed, with only a faint trace of yellow in the east, indicating an early moonrise over the mountains.

Hagen said, "I reckon the ore ain't goin' to assay up like I figured. But we'll get enough to set us up in Mexico."

Jeremy stared at him in the darkness. "Have you said anything to Maybelle," he wanted to know.

Hagen gave him a sharp glance. "Said anything to her about what?"

"About going to Mexico."

"You poor fool," Hagen snarled, whiskey making his voice sharper in the night stillness. "I only married Maybelle 'cause the mine looked rich. I'm pullin' out and leavin' her flat."

Hagen broke off suddenly for they were all conscious of a shadow behind them. The shadow materialized into Maybelle. For a moment there was dead silence, then she began to scream at Hagen.

"You tricked me!" she cried hysterically. "You beast!"

She went at him, clawing, scratching, kicking. Hagen got her around the waist and swung her over his hip. Then she bit Hagen's arm and he turned her loose with a curse. She whirled away from him and ran for the house, sobbing at every step.

Hagen took a minute to catch his breath. "I never knew she had that much fire," he said hoarsely, and started after her.

But she had locked the bedroom door on him.

When he got to the shed later, Hagen was sitting in a corner cleaning his rifle.

Hagen glanced up, frowning in thought.

"We've all got plenty of work to do if we're goin' to get that ore down to the smelter," he said, "but when we split up the profits you and me are goin' to settle things. You been pushin' me too much."

Brad gave them a drunken stare from his blankets. "That ain't no way for kin-folks to talk."

Jeremy could not trust himself to talk so took his blankets and went outside to bed down near the corral where he could watch house and the shed. It was plain to him that the only end to this would be to kill Hagen. And even if he was that lucky, there was always the Callans. He lay there a long time, staring up at the stars and remembering how Netta had looked in her bright dress.

The strain between Maybelle and Hagen did not lessen the next morning. A new hardness had come into the blonde girl's eyes, as if she had suffered a blow to her pride from which she could never recover.

That morning she and Netta took the wagon into town and returned about sundown with provisions they had purchased at the store.

"It does Maybelle good to get away," Netta said tiredly. "Jeremy, what's the trouble between her and Hagen? She won't tell me."

Jeremy evaded her question and went back to the arrastra. He kept Hagen constantly in sight and always wore his gun. When they took their meals, Jeremy always managed to sit with his back to the wall.

It went on for two weeks like that and the pile of ore kept growing. Hagen said it was time to start hauling to the smelter but when they went to get the wagon it was gone. Brad said he remembered seeing Netta and Maybelle going to town in it that morning.

Hagen cursed and returned to the tunnel. Brad picked up his ax and went down

to the pine thicket to cut some more timber.

It was shortly before noon when Jeremy was in the house slicing meat for a sandwich that Hagen came rushing in from the yard. One glance at Hagen's frantic eyes and Jeremy knew what had happened. He felt sick, and his knees were suddenly weak.

"The Callans," Hagen said hoarsely. "Grab a rifle and come on."

They ducked around the back of the house through the trees, zig-zagging up the hill over a stretch of bald rock until they came to the summit and threw themselves flat.

Jeremy inched forward and peered cautiously into the yard below. "Where's Brad?" he said anxiously. "Didn't you warn him, too?"

Hagen said, "They already got him. Lucky I seen the Callans comin' along the road or they'd have got us too."

Jeremy wet his lips with his tongue. "Brad won't have a chance unless we help him."

Hagen seized his arm. "The Callans likely won't look for us here, and we left no tracks on the rocks. Don't be a fool."

For the first time since he had known the man Jeremy saw fear shining in Hagen's green eyes.

The plod of horses sounded down in the yard and eight riders appeared out of the trees, herding Brad, who was on foot. Jeremy recognized Silas Callan and Reb and Hardy along with the others.

When the Callans had searched the house Silas Callan turned to Brad. "Where's your partners?"

Brad jerked his head toward the south. "Mexico. They pulled out last night."

The hot-headed Reb Callan snarled, "You're lyin'," and raised his quirt, but Brad did not flinch. He just stood there, a big solid man staring at the Callans who wanted his blood.

Silas made Reb drop his quirt.

Up on the hill Jeremy raised his rifle and Hagen said, "No use tryin' to get Brad away from them." But Jeremy shrugged aside his hand. Hagen cursed and put a cocked revolver at his temple. "If you fire that rifle they'll have us hangin'. We got a chance if we sit quiet."

"They'll kill Brad," Jeremy said through his teeth.

Down in the yard Silas Callan turned to a pot-bellied little man in a calfskin vest what sat the saddle of a roan.

"Jake, is this one of them men you saw the night Tyler was killed?"

The man called Jake nodded without hesitation.

That seemed to be a sentence of death, for Reb Callan uncoiled his rope and dropped a loop over Brad's thick neck. Then they marched him down to the road and the gnarled oak tree that the man had once said would make a fine tree for a hangin'.

Cold sweat broke out on Jeremy and he tried to inch away from that revolver muzzle at his skull.

Hagen said, "Make one move and I'll spill your brains on the rock."

Jeremy said, "To kill me you'll have to fire your gun and that'll bring the Callans. You won't risk that because you're afraid to die."

Out of the corner of his eyes he noted the indecision on Hagen's face. Jeremy seized this instant to leap aside, hoping he had guesed right, that Hagen would be afraid to fire the gun. He managed to swing up the rifle, but not in time to pull the trigger. Hagen slashed at him with his revolver barrel. That was the last thing Jeremy remembered, for blackness closed down on him, sudden and complete.

THERE was on way of knowing how long he lay there in the rocks but when he came awake Hagen was gone and so was his rifle. He staggered to his feet. Nausea struck him. Blood was

warm against his neck from a split scalp.

He staggered down the slant, seeing the empty yard. Then his eyes raised to the oak tree down by the road and he halted as if struck by a club. Something lifeless and bulky swayed gently in the mountain breeze from the end of a rope. Jeremy groaned and got down to the yard just as a team and wagon came tearing up from the road.

He touched his .44, then noted that it was Netta and Maybelle.

Dust swirled above the two girls on the seat. They were white-faced, stricken, and he knew they had seen Brad's body.

Netta sprang down from the wagon seat and ran toward him. Her arms went around him and her voice was filled with anger and hysteria.

"Maybelle got word to the Callans that you were here," she cried. "She did it that first day we went into town two weeks ago. When we were in Julian today I saw her talking to some strange men and it wasn't until later that she told me who they were. Oh, Jeremy, I'm so glad you're safe."

Jeremy looked at Maybelle on the wagon seat, seeing her disheveled blonde hair and torn dress, and he knew it was Netta's angry fingers that had done the damage.

Dazed as he was he didn't hear the footsteps until Maybelle screamed. He pivoted in time to see Hagen coming from behind the shed, a gun in his hand, his saddle bags slung over one arm. The man's greed had been too much. He wouldn't ride off and leave that money he had buried, even with a death threat hanging over his head.

Hagen dropped the bags to the ground and advanced on Maybelle. "So you wrote the Callans," he snarled. "Blast me for gettin' drunk and tellin' you the whole story."

And suddenly the Callans were there, riding up from the pine thicket, rifles

leveled. And Jeremy knew they had been nearby all the time, waiting for Hagen and himself to come out of the rocks.

Hagen's face seemed to fall apart. For one moment he tensed and Jeremy thought he would try and shoot his way out. Then he holstered his gun while the men dismounted and gathered in a little knot, holding their horses.

Silas Callan's eyes were cold. "Get the women out of the way, Hardy."

Hardy Callan helped Maybelle out of the wagon, but Netta refused to budge and it took two of them to get her away from Jeremy and up to the porch.

It seemed like a nightmare to Jeremy, standing under the bright mountain sun with the wind souging through the pines. Maybelle and Netta watching from the porch with stricken faces. The ring of grim men. Hagen quavering, licking his lips.

Silas Callan nodded his gray head at the pudgy man in the calfskin vest. "How about these two, Jake? Did you see them the night Tyler was murdered?"

Jake stared hard while a drop of cold sweat trickled down Jeremy's back.

Jake nodded. "Yep. I come down the street that night and the three of them was in the alley, Brad, Hagen and this young fella. I borrowed a match and lit my cigarette right there so I seen them real good."

After a moment Jake said, "When the shootin' was over it was Brad and Hagen that run outa the store. I didn't see this young fella, so reckon he wasn't in on the killin'."

Hagen began to shriek like a trapped animal. "Jeremy was with us! If I got to die he goes with me!"

He began blubbering like a woman, his green eyes wild. Sight of him groveling, begging for his life sickened the men and they were caught flat-footed by his sudden desperate play.

Suddenly he leaped back, cursing Jeremy in a high-pitched voice. Flame

licked out from his fist. Jeremy felt the full shock of the bullet in his leg and crumpled to the dust. From where he lay on the ground he saw the panic Hagen's quick shot had raised among the horses. They reared and snorted and ran between Hagen and the Callans. Dust boiled. Men shouted. Jeremy lifted his gun, having a clear view of the green-eyed man. When Hagen turned to throw another bullet into him, Jeremy fired and kept on firing until his gun was empty.

When Jeremy opened his eyes he saw Callan faces and Callan eyes around his bed in the house. Hardy Callan carried Hagen's saddlebags over his arm. Netta was sobbing, trying to heat water and find bandages.

Silas Callan stared down at Jeremy a moment then said, "The feud is dead. Let's keep it that way. And don't hold a grudge. Your uncle Brad was born to be hung."

The old man glanced at the frantic Netta, the hint of a smile on his stern lips.

"Get me a butcher knife, girl," he ordered. "I've got to dig a bullet out of this boy."

The Callans stayed around a couple of days and tended to the burying. Then after they left a little bald man in a shiny black suit drove up in a buggy, saying he was a justice of the peace from Julian and that Silas Callan had said there was somebody here who wanted to get married.

Maybelle spent the days alone in her room until a few weeks later when a horseman pulled into the yard. Jeremy hobbled to the door on his wounded leg and his mouth fell open at sight of Hardy Callan on the porch, holding a bunch of mountain violets.

"I—I come to call on Miss Maybelle," Hardy said, his face flaming. "We had a long talk last time I was here."

Jeremy grinned, and they entered the house together.

LAST STAGE TO PIEDMONT

By JOE ARCHIBALD



A man can change in seven years, and Burgoon Jack couldn't be sure. . . .

THE short man with the bluish beard braced himself against a boulder on the mountain slope and peered at the country spread out below him through a pair of field glasses. Scat Brazle was his name. He was mighty proud of the glasses. "Got them off a Concord stage," he always boasted. "From an army officer, no less. Can see from

one county to another." He kept watching the road that wriggled through the foothills which looked to the naked eye of the other man to be no more than a carelessly dropped length of dirty yellow ribbon.

"Time it was comin' along, Curt," Scat growled. "Make me a smoke, will you?"

The holdup man hunkered down near

*The law wanted a life and the stranger had two to give—
one that would take a lifetime to live out—and one that
wouldn't last out his draw!*

a mesquite bush had a young and lean face. A casual observer would have wondered at the lack of intensity in his mild brown eyes, and the evident distaste they displayed when they looked at Scat Brazle. He took out the makings and made a cigarette and then got to his feet. His left leg was bent outward at the knee and not because he had to buckle against the slope. It was the prime reason for Curt Major's being here with Brazle. He handed the short man the smoke just as Scat picked up movement down below.

"It's comin', Curt, an' kickin' up dust. Most likely a little late an' tryin' to make up time." Scat dropped to one knee and trained the field glasses on what looked like a slow-moving bug to Major. "Two men on the seat. We ought t' meet up with that stage at the other end of the pass just as the night begins. Let's get goin'."

"Sure they're carryin' that box, Scat?" Major asked nervously.

"I got ears," Brazle snapped. "I didn't hang around that town for two days just to draw flies. You just do your part of it an' I'll do mine. Don't know why I didn't tie up with an hombre's got two legs."

Curt Major nearly fell he swung so quickly toward Brazle, and the rage in his eyes dragged Scat's right hand down for a moment. "I told you never to mention this bum leg of mine, Scat! Don't pull that iron, because I can beat you any time or any day, when it comes to throwin' lead. I'm warnin' you for the last time."

Brazle slid his tongue along his thin and dry lips and brought both hands up. "All right, Curt, I'll remember."

The pair of spooks worked their way along the side of the slope and then descended to the clump of trees where they'd picket-pinned their horses. The sun was hitting the horizon when they were two miles from the gap. Curt Major felt the cold patches of unease under his arms and in the hollows under his knees and he felt as if he was beginning to rot inside. He

had to reach back for the will to go through with this night's work and convince himself that a certain end justified the means. He'd met Scat Brazle back in Vadosta a few hours after he'd talked with Sam Hevinghurst, the banker in that big cattle town, and he'd been ripe for picking. Thinking of that proposition he'd made Hevinghurst now made him wonder how even a nineteen-year-old kid could have been such a whack-ear.

"Invest in you?" the banker had asked unbelievably. "With no collateral save your signature?" His laugh would always be ringing in Curt Major's head. "You been readin' an Alger book, kid? It's been my experience that an apple don't fall far away from the tree, an' your father—"

Curt Major had walked out then, trying to walk as straight as any other man, and had sworn he'd get the money he needed in his own way. He guessed he'd talked a little too loud to himself as he'd wandered around Vadosta that night. Scat Brazle had taken him into The Carousel and had bought him his first drink. The fiery stuff had been just what he'd needed to dissipate whatever qualms there'd been left in him. Scat knew his background and had heard of his ambitions and knew he was plenty handy with a six-gun. The deal had been made.

"I'll stick just long enough to get the money I need," Curt had told Scat. "You satisfied?"

This would be the third holdup. As he neared the pass, Major hoped it would be the last. Scat had heard there was close to six thousand dollars in the express box coming from Holla. He lifted his head quickly when Brazle reined in close to his bay horse. "We'll jump that outfit just before they go through the gap, from where nobody would expect us to, Curt. You keep it covered with the Winch all the time. I'll do the rest."

"Don't worry about me," Major said, and hoped Scat couldn't smell the sweat

that was coming out all over him. He knew he'd never let the Winch go against anyone no matter how tight a spot he'd find himself in. Up to now no shooting had been necessary.

A hundred yards from where the road suddenly curved before snaking through the gap, Scat Brazle angled off toward a bunch of live oak. "We leave the broncs just back of 'em," he said. "We'll have lots of room to run across that stretch of meadow if we have to and get to the belt of timber. We come right out of the brush on either side of the road. The driver an' the guard'll be watchin' the mouth of the gap."

A strange feeling came over Curt Major. Scat's voice seemed to be caught up and thrown to a great distance and everything was blanketed by fog. Suddenly the voice drove back against him and all at once his head was clear and reminding him of the job he had to do. "What ails you, Curt?" Scat asked as he dropped off his horse.

"Nothin'," he said, and left the saddle.

A few minutes later they crouched in the brush on either side of the road and waited. Darkness deepened and the feeling of unreality came over young Major again. A low whistle from across the road dispelled it. He listened and heard the grind of rapidly turning wheels and the thump of hoofs.

It was a long spring-board rig with a

canvas top. Scat was in the road, his gun pointed at the driver's head, and his voice threatening death if the box was not thrown out pronto. Curt Major saw the guard move his right hand and he called out, "Reach, you jigger!" and lifted his Winch higher. A woman screamed far down in her throat. A heavy box was thrown into the road. Scat roared, "Whip up those horses an' keep goin'!"

The driver cursed and got the stage moving toward the gap, and then Major saw the canvas flap at the back of the wagon bulge out and saw a little stripe of fire burn through it. Numbness ran through his arms and legs as he saw Scat stagger. He watched Brazle recover and pour lead at the fast rolling stage. A woman screamed again. Scat yelled, "Pour it at 'em while I bust this box open, you fool!"

Curt Major threw two shots at the stage, saw splinters kick out from one of the big wheels. He heard the sound of Scat's six-gun as it smashed lead against the strongbox. Just as the stage lurched around the bend at the gap's mouth the guard let go with his own rifle and dirt thudded against Major's cheek. Brazle yelled, "Got it open, Curt. Leg it for the horses!"

He ran as if that bad leg were dragging the heavy weight of nightmare and just as it had been those other times he felt terribly afraid. Brazle was getting on his

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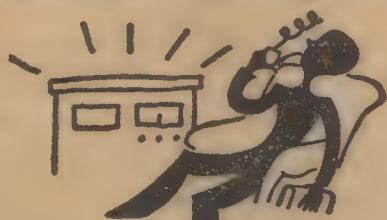
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horse, the front of his shirt bulged out, and the spook was laughing. "A haul, Curt," he said and swung his bronc toward the stretch of meadow.

Then this was to be the last. The words sang in Curt Major's mind all the way to the slab and sod shack they'd found a dozen miles southwest of the town of Holla. At times he heard Brazle grunt painfully and shift in his saddle and he called out, "You hit bad, Scat?"

"Scraped along the ribs," Brazle said.

INSIDE the cabin they counted the currency Scat had crammed inside his shirt and found they had gathered an even six thousand dollars. "Enough," Major said. "That'll be enough," and Brazle stared at him doubtfully, his lips pressed against an emotion more ugly than pain. The spook said, "I never saw an hombre I worked with I could trust too far from my sight, kid."

Major recognized the danger. "You'll trust this one, Scat. You knew how it was goin' to be all the time. I saddle and ride in the mornin' if I have to kill you to do it. That plain?"

The sweat beads glistened around Brazle's mouth. "All right, kid." He got up and ripped off his shirt and took the clotting stickiness along his ribs with it, and the blood trickled down his side again. Curt Major could see the bullet had not dug too deep and would heal soon after the proper dressing. His hands itched to get at it. "Lay down on the bunk, Scat, an' don't aggravate the bleedin'. I'll get water boilin'."

Administering to the outlaw sapped all the regrets out of Curt Major. This was not just Brazle here. He was all mankind in pain in a land far from crowded cities. He was all the kids with broken legs and dangerous fevers, all the women who would bear children without cowering in the shadow of death. Curt Major had tried to paint that picture for Heving-

hurst and had been laughed at, and now he felt no remorse. Sitting there at the side of the bunk, he remembered the night he'd ridden eighteen miles to get a doctor for a little sister who'd had a stabbing pain in her side, knowing all the way there would be little chance to save her. A fifteen-year-old kid riding a horse off its feet and going down under it and smashing his leg. The next day he'd learned of the little girl's death.

They were performing miracles of healing and saving in the crowded cities. The people out here had just as much right to live. Again that feeling that he wasn't rightfully in the cabin with Scat Brazle swept over him and things in the dimly-lit hut lost their shape. He guessed he was fagged out. Scat fell asleep and he got up and spread his blanket on the floor and then fanned out the smoky lamp. He awoke a dozen times during the night, his sixth sense lively and alert, and listened for sounds of a posse out there in the night. . . .

Curt Major prepared to leave the hut an hour before the sun was up and Scat Brazle sat on the edge of the bunk, quiet and sullen.

"Enough grub for a while here, Scat," Major said. "I'm takin' none of it. I wish you luck."

"Keep away from towns," Brazle snapped. "If they grab you it won't be long before they lock me up."

"I'll let that pass," Curt Major ground out.

"So long, kid. Maybe some day you'll get a chance to cut a banker's heart out," Scat said with a twisted grin. "I think you're loco."

Curt Major rode all morning, giving the town of Holla a wide berth. There was but one town he knew where he would dare to purchase the clothes he'd need to make the day-coach ride east, and that was Bailey's Ford close to the state line. He figured to reach it by nightfall but he

felt terribly heavy in the saddle at dusk and was aware of the bronc's labored breathing. Dropping off a low bench he saw a light near a string of timber and approached it cautiously. He heard broncs stamping restlessly and the nervous nicker his approach drew from one of them. He stopped and peered into the dark and made out the shape of a cabin. A voice called out, "Go on, friend. Chuck's just about ready," and he quickly glanced to his right and saw a man hunkered down near a big cottonwood, the tip of his cigarette aglow.

"Thanks," he said, and was not sure of his next move. His hunger decided for him and he rode to the cabin and tied his horse to the rail of a small corral. The man who'd hailed him stepped up behind him. "Line cabin for The Paddle," he said. "Go right in."

There were three punchers in the cabin. They nodded and told him to get the lead out and sit down. Curt Major was poignantly aware they were appraising his bad leg and panic nearly sent him stumbling out of there. Everything moved along hazily in his mind—the food he ate, the strumming of a guitar and a man's baritone voice; questions he answered mechanically, evasively; fear pressing him along with a terrible fatigue; the warm bunk and blessed sleep.

Then came the knock on the door, and men pouring into the line cabin; the rib-rocked face with eyes like snapping steel traps; a powerfully built man well beyond middle age with a heavy mane of hair powdered at the temples; no badge of authority on his cowhide vest; his voice thumping against Curt Major's brain and putting fear into his stomach. Once he had seen this man before—where had it been? He turned his face to the wall and slowly reached for the gun he'd put under the blankets, and felt like sobbing his insides out.

The Paddle punchers listened to the

account of the holdup. He heard that Scat Brazle was dead. They'd found the hideout in the hills not long after Curt Major had left and Scat had refused to come peaceably. "We're after the other spook," the big man said. "I aim to get him if I have to hang on until I'm ninety or a hundred. My nephew was ridin' that stage and he got a bullet through his head. The driver was sure one of the spooks had somethin' wrong with one of his legs. The one packin' the Winch. Brazle's legs were both as straight as mine."

Young Curt Major stopped breathing. A numbness went through him when fear had spent most of its force. The silence in the line cabin held for many breathless seconds and it crowded against a man as if it had tangible shape.

A puncher spoke. "Haven't seen no gimp-legged hombres, mister. Can look around if you want."

"No cause for you gents to lie," the big man said. "You hear anythin' or come across him git word to me in Holla. I took over the sheriff's office there three weeks ago. I'm Burgoo John Garstin. Who's that jigger in the bunk?"

Curt Major wondered how frightened a man could get before his heart stopped beating.

"Sit up, you!" Garstin roared.

"Look," a puncher said, "the boss don't hire cripples, Sheriff!"

He sat up in his bunk and gathered all the will he had and stared at Garstin. The man swore his disappointment and swung around. "A kid, that's all. Let's get out of here, boys."

The Paddle punchers yanked him out of the bunk later. A thin man said, "Drift before we change our minds, you side-winder! Wa'n't for your tender age you'd have your neck in a noose right now. That an' your bum leg!"

He remembered telling these men he'd never killed anybody, and trying to express his gratitude. They'd sent him stum-

bling out of the line cabin to his bronc one of them had hurriedly saddled. He'd never forgotten what they'd said as he rode off. "You'll need more than one break, kid. Burgoon John never lost a badman yet, and none of them shot one of his kin. You ain't got much time t' live."

HE WOKE up, the cold sweat soaking the patchwork quilt. Now the nightmare was behind him again. He had lived through it many times during the last seven years. This was a hotel room in a town called Xenia on the edge of the Muleshoe country and the first light of dawn poured in through one of the dirty windows. Sitting up in the bed, he saw his face reflected in the mirror of a commode. He had changed in many ways. There was a dark stubble on his chin and the heavy mustache he had carefully trained gave him the professional appearance of the men back east who had made him a doctor of surgery and medicine. He had a new name, which was Frank Peyton, but there was one part of him he could never change, the leg that was bent outward at the knee.

He could have lived the rest of his life back in some crowded city without fear of a shadow called Burgoon Jack, and practiced there and possibly have attained fame and wealth, but nothing was more remote from his mind. Out here ignorance still walked hand in hand with death. This was where he was sorely needed.

He got up and closed the window. There was a bite to the wind that drove in. Dead leaves were carpeting the road he had followed the previous afternoon and snow was nearly due. He had eighty miles yet to go before he reached his objective, the cattle and mining town of Piedmont. The stage left at seven. He drew on the Justins he'd bought the night before and walked around the room to get the feel of them, and knew he would not be satisfied until he felt a horse under him. He

finished dressing, picked up his old valise and left the hotel.

Curt Major stood on the edge of the walk, his wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his eyes, and studied the faces of the men who were already abroad. It was a precaution he'd always have to take. A man came up beside him and said, "You takin' the stage, friend?" And he turned easily for there was no sign of advanced age in the voice. "Figure so," he said, and liked this man's round face.

"Weather promises t' be tricky."

Major nodded, and looked up at the leaden sky. His nose caught the scent of lavender and his ears picked up the rustle of undershirts. A gruff voice said, "Amy, you write the minute you git there, don't forget."

The drummer adjusted his stickpin. Under his breath he said, "Friend, we're havin' mighty pleasant company it looks like."

Major glanced at the woman out of the corner of his eye and all at once it occurred to him that he had known little about the best part of life. She was tall and straight and very beautiful and had light brown hair and lively dark eyes.

The drummer said, "Here comes the stage, friend. I didn't catch your name?"

"Peyton," Major said. Two passengers had already boarded the rig. It was an elongated Democrat wagon with a fringed top and side curtains that could be rolled up or down according to the vagaries of the elements, and it was drawn by a pair of chestnut horses.

"Pile in," the driver said unceremoniously. "Got to leave on time."

Curt Major suddenly realized that he was offering the girl his hand and he nearly withdrew it as she lifted her skirt and put a daintily shod foot on the flat iron step. "Thank you," she said, and smiled. He settled in a seat beside her, his valise held between his knees, and then the stage was rolling out of Xenia and Curt Major

looked back to a day he and Scat Brazle had lain in wait for one. Ghosts whispered in the wind that swept down from the low hanging buttes to the northeast, and told Major that seven years had little or no effect on a man's memory. At the end of the first two miles he began to absorb some of the talk going on around him.

A heavy-set man in a sheepskin coat was not careful with his talk. He sat in front of Major. Once he turned and stared boldly at the girl, grinning at her. "That gent beside you can't keep you warm, ma'am, call on me." He laughed loudly. "This coat's big enough for the two of us."

"You're not funny," Major snapped. "I'm tellin' you that'll be enough."

"If he don't figure so," the driver yelled back, "he will git a chance to use his feet more'n his tongue!"

The brash passenger became quiet. Major looked at the girl and she smiled at him. "I'm Amy Trendler," she said. "I'm going to teach school at Piedmont. My first job and I'm terribly afraid of it."

"And I'm going to be the new doctor there, if they'll have me, miss," Major said for only her to hear. "I'm some nervous myself. The name is Frank Peyton."

Her laughter was music. The wind had put red roses in her cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes. There was a question he wanted to ask her and was amazed that it should suddenly occur to him. If there had been a man who'd found favor in her eyes back there, wouldn't he have been on hand to tell her good-by?

Her father, he learned, as the miles stretched out behind the stage, was owner of a small ranch near Xenia. She had gone to Normal school, had decided not to try and teach in her own town. Frank Peyton must have heard that old bromide about a prophet being without honor in his own neck of the woods. Certain parents in Xenia would expect some partiality.

Major gave no reason for his choice of a place to start his practice, and turned the talk into a new channel. "Gettin' mighty chilly," he said. "I have a blanket in my bag, Miss Trendler."

"I have an afghan with me," the girl said. "If you'll help me get it spread out—"

An hour later he was calling her Amy. The stage went through a narrow pass and came out to wind-swept flats, and the driver said, "Be at the Junction in about half an hour. We'll fill up there an' git the frost out of our gizzards. We stop just twenty minutes."

Men struggled with the side curtains and made them tight. The wind tore at them and made sounds like the rapid fire of a Winch. "Might be headin' into a storm," the driver said.

Major thought he imagined it at first, but it soon became apparent that the girl was huddled very close to him, and he could feel strands of her silken hair caress his cheek. He was a little sorry when the shapes of several buildings loomed up ahead.

Twenty minutes later, Curt Major went out of the small hotel and joined the driver of the stage. Flakes of snow were falling and the wind shouldered along the walk and threw boulders of concussion along the front of the stage stop.

"What do you think, friend?" Major asked.

"We can buck it to Cross River all right," the driver said. "Can stay over in the old slaughterin' shed there if we have to, Peyton. Better go in an' git yourself another cup of coffee."

He went inside and sat down next to Amy. She looked apprehensive and he grinned at her. "Just a flurry," he said.

TOWARDS dusk, with the stage caught in a blizzard, Major had his arms around the girl and had forgotten that he was half-frozen. Great

sheets of snow swept across the road and filtered through the curtains until the slouched passengers were powdered white from head to foot. The horses were going more slowly now, ploughing through drifts that nearly obscured the road. "These horses know the way blind-folded," the driver roared back. "We'll be safe enough."

Curt Major caught the doubt in the man's hoarse voice. The wind became stronger and struck mightily against the sides of the stage. It was a flimsy rig caught in an immensity of storm—infinite thing in a howling world of freezing white.

The dark came on swiftly and an ominous silence gripped the passengers. The driver got three lanterns lit and handed one back to Major. He put it between Amy's feet, wrapped a blanket more tightly around her and drew her to him as close as he could. He thought grimly, *I know of no more pleasant way of dying.*

"Can't make Cross River," the driver finally admitted. "These animals are about spent. Figure we better pull up near that bunch of trees up ahead an' see if we can make a fire."

A cry was just audible above the whine of the wind. The driver roared, "A light comin' this way!" He stopped his laboring team, sleeved his eyes and bent forward. "Jehosophat!" he finally exclaimed. "A man on a horse." He ripped the curtain loose and leaned out and shouted, "Ain't much room in here, mister. Just about ready to give up ourselves. What's that?"

Major couldn't hear the talk up ahead for several moments. Then the driver turned in his seat. "We're three miles from that hombre's place. He'll lead us off at the next fork. Was on his way to the Junction. Come on, get along, Harry. Dig in there, Tom. You got to git us there."

The drummer banged Major on the shoulder. "Here," he yelled. "I've been

savin' this bottle. Give the lady a good swallow, Peyton."

The horses plunged crazily and more than once it seemed that the stage would certainly turn over. The driver snapped at the lines, swore and exhorted until his voice was dry and shrill. Up ahead a light wavered in the snow-choked blackness. Major kept talking to Amy Trendler as hours seemed to pass. And suddenly the driver let out a great cry of relief. "Lights up ahead. We're at the ferry, an' thank God!"

The horses stopped wallowing. The stage lurched to a stop. "Hurry an' git under cover," the driver said. "Leave your stuff where it is. Ain't goin' to be stolen a night like this!"

Major could hardly move. His bad leg was a stump of wood under him, but somehow he got himself and the girl off the stage and waded knee deep with her through the drifts and into the blessed warmth of the house that looked like something unreal in the shrieking white inferno. A woman took Amy from him. Her gaunt face was filled with anguish and he wondered why as he crowded against the iron stove with the others.

The warmth drove into half-frozen bodies and dulled the senses of them all for several minutes. Voices barely registered in Major's mind. There was the mingled smell of steaming bodies and the lingering odor of cooking and tobacco smoke. Nothing mattered but the delicious warmth, the reprieve from what seemed certain death. The blood warmed in him and edged his faculties and now he looked around anxiously for Amy. He saw her lying on an old horsehair sofa in one corner of the room, the thin woman with the graying hair chafing her stockinged feet. He turned and braced himself against the wall and felt the pull of a pair of eyes.

Major saw the stage driver with a glass of whiskey in his hand, seated at a table that had not been cleared of supper dishes.

He was saying to a raw-boned man, "What in Tophet sent you out on such a night, Barker?"

"Little girl's mighty sick. Had to find a doctor, mister. But I figure there's no chance for a man lives in such a forsaken place. All we got left is prayers."

Major was about to speak when he looked toward the stove and saw the man who was leaning forward in an old rocker. Shock hit him and he fought desperately to keep it from fanning out of his eyes. Burgoo Jack Garstin, the stem of a heavy brier gripped in his teeth, his eyes sharp and searching. They dropped from Major's face and to that leg that was bent outward at the knee, and then lifted quickly again to gleam with a questioning light.

"Maybe she ain't so bad as you think, Barker," the stage driver said.

"I know the signs," the ferryman said in a small dead voice. "She'll surely die."

The word had passed around and an oppressive quiet came over the room. Barker's wife got up from Amy Trendler's side and suddenly lifted her hands to her face and cried softly. Major called out, "Amy—"

"Not her," the woman said, and dropped her hands. "She's all right, she's sleepin'." She hurried out of the room and closed a door behind her and the ferryman got up and followed.

"A doctor," the voice of Burgoo Jack said. "The difference between life an' death. I'd give all I owned or ever hoped to have to have one's knowledge now."

Curt Major's jaws were locked tight and he thought of an oath he'd taken. He also thought of a hangman's rope and a place hemmed in by high stone walls. A worse storm raged in his mind than the one hammering at the big frame house. He stood quiet and said nothing, his soul sick inside him.

"It just couldn't be," Burgoo Jack said. "Once I heard of a man. Went wild

as a kid. He had a horse fall on him. I never did see his face. Met up with a man after a certain holdup who knew him. Said this man, Curt Major, had an ambition to be a doctor; but I guess more'n one hombre could bust his leg!"

Major sat down. The stage driver said, "You talkin' to yourself, friend?"

"Maybe," Burgoo Jack said. "Funny how the blizzard come up and drove me to the ferry. Beats' me, that Barker's try to git to the Junction saved half a dozen lives. Never found no doctor, looks like, though."

Amy stirred on the sofa and Curt Major's nerves started singing. Only Amy Trendler knew. A word from her and he would never continue on to Piedmont. Burgoo Jack wasn't sure. A man can change in seven years. Now he heard the sobbing in the next room. A door opened and Barker came out, looking ten years older than when he'd followed his wife in.

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"What's a man's life against that of a little girl's?" Burgoo Jack said, his words hard and measured.

Curt Major stared at a door, at the crack of light beenath it. He let his eyes stray toward Amy and then he knew the decision he had to make. He turned his eyes on Burgoo Jack and said, "Go out to the stage an' get me the black valise tagged with my name. I'm Doctor Frank Peyton." He strode across the room, opened a door and stepped inside. In a few moments he had examined the little Barker girl and knew how serious her trouble really was. His own voice strange to him, he said, "Quick, Mrs. Barker. Heat a pan of water on the stove. Bring it to a boil. Get all the lamps and lanterns that are at hand!"

He went out into the big room and he singled out two men. "Clear the table there and drop the leaves down and bring it in the bedroom. Hurry up an' don't ask questions!"

He forgot the past. The future meant nothing now, only the present. He told the Barkers what had to be done and the risk that was involved, and to help him with their prayers. "A bad appendix," he said. "I have to remove it. Is there anything in the house that will put the little girl to sleep? Paregoric or laudanum? Anything."

BURGOO JACK came into the house driven by a great gust of wind and a cloud of snow, a valise clutched tight in his arms. Curt Major ripped it from the lawman's grasp and snapped it open. He took out the instruments he had never used outside of the medical laboratory, and dropped them into boiling water. He dominated that house, the blizzard-swept countryside for miles and miles around it. A life was in the palm of his hand and a grim shadow stood between him and the child who had been laid gently on the hard table. The stage driver

and the store drummer were arranging the lanterns and the lamps. Mrs. Barker, the need for haste greater than her torment, brought Major a bottle of laudanum. "All of you get out of this room now!" he snapped, and then he saw Amy Trendler on her feet staring at him with wondrous eyes.

"Frank," the girl said, "please let me help. I'm sure I can help you."

"All right, Amy. Cover your hair with clean cloth," Major said, and then went into the bedroom, rolling up his sleeves. He let Mrs. Barker help him on with the crumpled surgeon's apron, and then he administered the laudanum. He needed ether here. He couldn't tell how long it would take. It was as if everyone outside quieted along with the little girl with the blue eyes and honey-colored hair. The house was very still. The wind seemed to lose its fury. "I'm ready, Doctor," a voice at his elbow said.

"Amy, I hope I can stand beside you on your first day at school," Major said and took a scalpel from the pan of steaming water. Mrs. Barker turned her face away.

He was amazed at his coolness and skill as he made the incision. He worked swiftly, had to pause for a few moments to tighten the straps that held the patient to the table. The sweat was clammy on his skin and his throat was dry and filled with an ache.

Men walked the floor out in the next room but Major could not hear them. He was oblivious to the storm's furious temper. He knew that with these limited facilities, the danger of infection was great. He knew that if his patient died it would be easy to go along with Burgoo Jack. He held his breath and removed the inflamed membrane, worked swiftly with the needle and surgeon's thread. He turned toward Amy, his eyes deep in his head, the muscles drawn tight over the bones of his face. He nodded and then had to

catch her as her knees began to give.

Mrs. Barker got up and called out, "Doctor, will she live?" Her eyes were filled with dread.

"In God's hands now, ma'am," Major said. "I'll stay here until—" He eased Amy into a chair, and stumbled out of the room. The faces in the big kitchen were unreal.

He sat down by the stove and dropped his head in his hands. "She would have died if I hadn't operated, gentlemen," he said numbly. "It was my first operation."

A man handed him a glass of whiskey. A voice said, "Better down it, Doc."

Time dragged and the blizzard outside reached its full height. Curt Major got up and went into the bedroom and found Mrs. Barker and Amy watching over the child. He bent over the patient and she opened her eyes and smiled at him. He took her pulse and her temperature and marveled at the encouraging results. "She'll be in some pain for a few days," he said, "but that is only natural. She has eighty out of a hundred chances to live."

He went out of the room, one arm around Amy, and he grinned at Barker. "I won't leave here until I'm sure," he said to the frightened man, and looked at Burgoo Jack defiantly. The past rolled in and over him and now he knew the end had justified the means. He thought of little legs that would be broken and many other stomach aches and fevers and was not sorry now he'd ridden with Scat Brazle. "These cases used to be incurable," he said in a professional voice. "Now we can save most of them. I spent seven years finding out how it was done. I'd like another drink, Burgoo Jack."

"You know, Doc," the aging sheriff said, "takes an old fool like me a long time to get sense in his head. One thing I aim to do is call on a money-hungry coyote by name of Hevinghurst and tell him what I think of him. Doc, my hat's off to you. I wonder what ever become

of a spook named Curt Major?" He leaned close to the doctor as he handed him the whiskey. "You hadn't sent me for that bag, I'd have killed you."

Curt Major took a long deep breath. "It would have been comin' to me, Burgoo Jack," he said, and drained the glass.

The blizzard spent itself thirty-six hours later and the bright sun broke through. The little patient took some beef broth Amy spooned out for her and Major knew he had won. A shard of warm light came in through the window and struck full against the child's face and Major considered it an omen, the beginning of an era when men would strive to save rather than destroy.

Mrs. Barker left the room and Major said, "Amy, are you interested in a man?"

The girl did not lift her head. "Yes, Doctor."

"I had to ask you," Major said. "I wonder does he realize how lucky he is?"

"I was interested when he helped me onto the stage, Frank," she said softly. "What are you trying to tell me?" She got up and put the bowl and spoon aside and looked at him and waited. He reached out and took her in his arms. A few moments later the Barkers came in and Curt Major was once more sitting at the bedside of his patient.

The ferryman said, "How can we ever pay you, Doc?"

"I've already been paid a million times more'n I'm worth, friend. Mrs. Barker, when we reach Piedmont, we intend to get married."

The ferryman smiled broadly. "I understand, Doc."

Another two days passed before the stage could leave Barker's ferry. Burgoo Jack Garstin saddled his horse before the stage driver got his team out of the stable and made ready to ride toward the north. "I'll tell certain gents I found you," he said to Major. "And sent you on your way. Good luck, Doc—an' Mrs. Doc."

CACTUS ON YOUR GRAVE

HE WAS nineteen but looked older because he'd been his own man for over four years. He was medium tall and well muscled from three seasons in the Kansas wheat fields and his eyes were as gray and remote as the foothills rolling up to the high country north of Concho. He wore the high bib overalls of the farmer and a cowman's boots, but he was cut from neither pattern. He was fighting man. From his close cropped blond head to his broad, hard-fisted hands he looked like one hundred and sixty pounds of trouble. A bone-butted forty-five rode low on his left thigh. It was an expensive gun and better cared for than the man who wore it.

He stood in the center of Concho's town square and stared up at the flapping canvas banner announcing the land auction coming off this morning, then elbowed his way across the crowded grounds toward the wooden platform where the bids were to be read.

A huge, rough map was pinned on top of a plank table near the platform and the tracts of land to be sold were marked off and numbered. Nearby was a stock of blank sheets of paper on which the hopeful homesteaders could write their bid, and a slotted box to receive them. He reached for a sheet of paper, looked at the map until he found Tract Seven, then began writing.

Someone pushed up against him and a pleasant, feminine voice said close to his

ear, "If you get that tract, mister, and if we get ours, we'll be neighbors."

He turned and saw a smiling, dark-haired girl about his own age, maybe younger. She looked at him mischievously, her eyes dark with the excitement of the coming auction and prospects of a new home. He nodded, looked at her a long moment, then returned to his writing.

The girl said, "I'm Linda Adams. We came all the way from Carthage, Missouri. Pa bid ten dollars per acre on Tract Six but he's scared it won't be high. What're you bidding?" Her voice was both eager and apprehensive and he sensed the loneliness in it. It was a long pull from Missouri to Concho, New Mexico, and the girl was starved for talk with someone her own age.

But he was not a talkative man. He wrote, "Ernie Curtiss, from Wichita, Kansas," but did not specify the amount he wanted to bid. Instead he slipped a bullet from his cartridge belt and twisted the paper around it, then reached over and dropped it in the slotted box beside the table.

He looked at the girl. "I wouldn't give ten dollars for the whole passel of it," he said flatly, and he meant it, for he was not buying a farm but a grave for the man he aimed to kill.

His eyes drifted over the eager homesteaders swarming around the grounds and then switched to the pompous, fleshy-faced man in the swallow-tailed coat stand-

By **DAN KIRBY**

*"This is good land, mister, for growin' men.
But to grow 'em good you gotta plant 'em
bad!"*



There were three of them against his gun, and he had lost the advantage of surprise. . . .

ing in the platform. The man raised his hands in a gesture to quiet the homesteaders.

"Men," he shouted, "you all know the rules. You've picked out the tract of land you want to settle on and you've made your bid and dropped it in the box. The bids will be read now and the tracts go to the highest bidders. You don't have to

pay but half cash. I'll carry your mortgages on the balances. Don't pay to run yourself short until you get in your first crop." He paused and wiped a white linen handkerchief over his face, "When Jake Bannock makes a deal it's a deal. No matter whether the bid is a dollar or a dime the land still goes. You men got any questions?"

Ernie Curtiss pushed his hat a little further back on his head and squared off in front of the stilt-legged platform. He squinted up at the big man. "It's clear enough how a man goes about gettin' his land, Bannock. What I want to know is how does he go about holding on to it?"

A queer light seeped into Bannock's eyes and his face grew pink but he looked at Ernie and said blandly, "Why, now, kid, it takes work to make a farm pay off. I can't guarantee you a living, all I can do is give you a chance to make it."

A farmer spoke up behind Ernie. "That's fair enough, mister. All I want is a chance." And the other settlers yelled their assent.

Ernie turned and saw Linda Adams standing behind him. A lanky, rawboned man with work stooped shoulders and a thin, weather-seamed face stood beside her and Ernie reckoned the man to be her father. He saw the anxious, expectant look in the man's faded blue eyes and he saw it reflected in the faces of the other farmers. He felt sorry for the whole lot of them. They didn't know what it was going to be, holding on to that land. They didn't know about old Tom Ladd and the fence-cutting, gun-slinging, hardcase riders that ran his mighty Lazy L Spread.

Jake Bannock started reading the bids then and sorting them into sacks according to the number of the tract of land each bid was submitted on. He came to the twisted paper Ernie had dropped into the box and when he opened it the bullet rolled into the palm of his hand. For a moment he sat motionless and then Ernie saw the color ebb from the big man's face. Bannock ran his tongue over dry lips and stared out into the crowd.

"Which one of you is Ernie Curtiss?"

ERNIE pushed forward, reached for the rail around the platform and climbed up inside it. He said quietly, "I'm Ernie Curtiss, Bannock. You

might remember me as Jim Curtiss's whelp. I buried Jim out on Tract Seven four years ago." He nodded toward the bullet clutched in the big man's hand. "That's my bid, Bannock. I figure it's high."

He kept his voice low, so the farmers would not hear.

Jake Bannock's face seemed to tighten suddenly and his eyes grew stormy with a sudden anger. "What the hell, Curtiss, you tryin' to scare somebody? Yore pa died before he paid off his land debt and I foreclosed. It was a business proposition."

Ernie nodded, but a chill crept into his eyes and there was an edge to his voice when he said, "That's what I'm offerin' you, Bannock. A business proposition. Jim Curtiss didn't just die. He was murdered, Bannock, as you damn well know. Drygulched by a backshooting coyote who thinks that valley was put out there just to graze his stinkin' cows."

Jake Bannock grunted. His jowled face became a bland mask as he studied the kid through heavy lidded eyes. "All right, your pa was drygulched by Tom Ladd. It ain't my fault that he couldn't protect himself. I'm sellin' farms, kid, not life insurance. Now, what's this business proposition you got on yore mind?"

Ernie's right hand clenched to a white-knuckled fist and his temples throbbed with the desire to smash that fist into the puffy, unfeeling face before him. Bannock could have warned his father and the other nesters about Tom Ladd when he sold them the farms four years ago. That warning might have kept Jim Curtiss alive. But then again, it might have killed Jake Bannock's land sale if he'd told the nesters about Tom Ladd and his hired killers. So he'd kept it quiet.

Ernie said, "I want Tract Seven, Bannock. I got no money to pay for it. I wouldn't pay you if I did have. Pa paid more'n it was worth to start with. You've

likely resold it a couple of times since. You ain't losin' nothing by givin' it to me. You'll do it, Bannock, or I'll circulate among them farmers and tell them enough about Tom Ladd and what they can expect out there in the valley to chill the bidding on the other tracts. Figure it quick, mister. Give me a tract free and sell the rest to the highest bidders or you don't sell any of them."

Two gun-hung, cold-eyed men climbed the steps onto the platform. One of them touched Bannock on the shoulder. "What's the trouble, Jake? Them homesteaders are gettin' restless out there."

The big man nodded. "It's all right, Kelso. I've just sold the kid here a farm." He reached over and shuffled through a stack of deeds, found the one marked "Tract Seven" and signed it. He handed it to Ernie.

"All right, kid." He said quietly, "You drive a hard bargain, but here's yore deed. Now vamoose."

He had his farm. He'd promised his pa that someday he would come back and reclaim that land and now he'd done it. And when his dad had finally died from the bullet hole in his neck, Ernie had promised himself that he'd seek out the man that killed Jim Curtiss and bury his mangy carcass at the foot of his father's grave. It didn't matter to Ernie Curtiss that a couple dozen other farmers were about to get roughed up in the process. It was men of their breed that pulled out and refused to back up the fight when Jim Curtiss made his stand against that murdering cattle boss, Tom Ladd. Now he figured they'd have to fight this time or go broke because times were tough and money hard to come by. When they soaked their hard cash in these farms they'd have to stay put or starve.

He swung down from the platform and walked across the square to the shade of a big cottonwood. He heard Jake Bannock calling off the names of the high bidders

and he noted with a little interest that Linda Adam's dad was one of those who walked up and received a deed. Then a tall, square-shouldered rider on a rangy sorrel gelding turned off the street across the square toward the homesteaders and Ernie forgot about Linda Adams. This man was Tom Ladd.

The farmer, Adams and two other square-faced, stolid men walked over to Ernie. Adams smiled. "I'm Jeb Adams, son, these two are friends of mine who made the trip from Missouri with me, Ben Stokes and Ray Summers. Reckon we'll all be neighbors now." His eyes drifted down the street to where the trail stretched out into the flat valley land. "It's a good land. A land of plenty."

Ernie's lips crooked into a sardonic grin, his eyes still on the horseman who had pulled rein in front of the platform and sat facing Jake Bannock. Ernie said, "All you'll find plenty of here, Adams, is trouble. All you'll plant out there in the valley is yore own people and all you'll raise is cactus and dust devils—unless you and the rest have guts enough to finish a war before you start a crop." He moved across the square toward the auction platform, conscious that the three farmers were staring after him with open mouths.

He could hear Tom Ladd speaking now and he recognized the voice because he'd heard it raised in savage anger against his father four years ago. It was a harsh, driving voice and it beat against his ears like a battering ram.

"Bannock," the rancher was saying, "you and your shiftless beef eatin' sod-busters have been thorns in my side for the past four years. I offered to buy that land of yours myself. I offered you a fair price. If another crop of plow-chasers come out there and start slow-elkin' my herd when they get hungry it'll mean more trouble."

Jake Bannock shrugged. "It's my land, Ladd. You had your chance."

"Bannock," the rancher said, "I can't pay farm land prices for short grass pasture. I don't need the grass no way. It's just a nuisance and a trouble-maker. You been gettin' rich off that land just resellin' it every year. All I got to say is this, and I want these farmers to hear it. Put up yore fences and stay inside of them. If I catch you cuttin' into my herd, damming up my water supply or crowdin' over on my grass there'll be more trouble out there than you can find in hell."

Ernie Curtiss eased up to the platform, facing the rancher. He said bleakly, "What's yore game, Ladd? Maybe you're foolin' some of these sodbusters, but I know you. You come ridin' in here cryin' around like it's the farmers that start all the trouble. I know better. I was here four years ago, Ladd. I seen what you did to them homesteaders tryin' to run 'em off. When one of them bowed his neck and told you to get the hell off his farm you drygulched him or had it done. Well, maybe you're right this time. Maybe we will start the trouble. That's a pretty good idea. Fact is I'd put a slug through yore black heart now if I didn't want to break yuh and see you crawl afore I do it."

Tom Ladd's hard, tanned face turned gray with anger and his eyes were blue ice. He was in his middle fifties but there was an ageless quality about him that belied his years. His gaze swept over Ernie and settled again on Bannock. He said somberly, "You've run in a tough one, Jake. The trouble don't come soon enough to suit you, so you promote it a little." He neck reined his sorrel away from the platform and rode across the square to disappear down the street.

THERE was muttering among the farmers, Jeb Adams said uneasily, "You shouldn't have talked like that, son. We have to get along with that man if we stay and prosper."

Ernie laughed dryly, "You can't make friends with a rattler, pop. He wants trouble and I'll give it to him. You gents have got to back my play or pull out and turn your land back to Bannock."

Ernie caught Linda Adams staring at him. The girl's face was tensed and she looked scared. He dropped his own eyes and stalked off, elbowing his way through the farmers. He kept walking until he hit the street and turned down it, not caring where he went but needing to move so he could think. He'd waited a long time for the showdown with Tom Ladd and his riders. He had to play his hand right now or maybe end up like his father with a cowman's bullet in his back.

He walked down one side of the street and up the other. He came to the Spotted Dog Saloon just as Jake Bannock and his two men were going inside. Bannock saw him and motioned to him.

Bannock said, "I liked the way you handled yoreself out there on the square, kid. I'll buy you a drink."

They went inside, the two henchmen moving on back to a corner table and Bannock stopping at the bar.

Ernie moved up beside him. He said, "Sarsaparilla," and froze the barkeep's grin with a look.

Jake Bannock said easily, "You got yoreself in a crossfire, kid. I reckon Tom Ladd is home right now greasin' up his six-gun and them nesters looked like they wanted to string you up. You're right, though. You got to call Ladd's bluff if you stay put out there and if you nesters got the jump on him you might cripple him up to where you could handle him all right." He paused and poured a drink from the bottle on the bar, "Fact is, kid, if you're figurin' on something like that I could loan you a couple of good men."

Ernie nursed his glass. He said quietly, "Why, Bannock? You got no love for me or them nesters. I took you for a hundred and sixty acres of land today and

if them nesters take Ladd this time you're through with yore little game of sellin' and resellin' that same land." He set down his glass and wiped a sleeve across his mouth.

Jake Bannock shrugged. "I got money tied up in this town, kid, and the town's dying. There ain't no trade to draw from except Tom Ladd's crew. We need farmers around here. Fifty farmers can make a living on ground that won't graze but one cattle spread."

Ernie's eyes shifted to the thin, hard face of the gunman, Kelso, and took in the flat, brutal face of his companion, and he shook his head. "I reckon we'll make out without 'em, Bannock. How come you got them tailin' you around. You scared of somebody?"

Jake Bannock's fat face flushed angrily but he forced a laugh. "No, I ain't scared none, kid." He put down his glass and moved toward his henchmen. "Good luck."

Ernie left the saloon then and headed down the street for the gray, sun-faded hotel that stood precariously on the far corner of the single street. He figured on getting a room for the night, and tomorrow he'd visit the farmers. He'd convince

them that they ought to hit at Tom Ladd now before he got in the first blow. One good night raid might make the difference. Burn the murdering, nester hating son's buildings, set fire to his hay, kill off a few of his cattle and a few of his men too, if they got in the way. That would show him they meant business. And while he was nursing his wounds and counting his losses maybe he'd remember old Jim Curtiss and how he'd put that bullet in Jim's back. Maybe it would soak through his hard skull that Jim's whelp, Ernie, was back here for the kill.

He signed in at the hotel and went straight to his room. He peeled off his shirt and his boots and sank down on the rickety bed. It was working out all right, he figured. Inside of a week he'd plant Tom Ladd at the foot of Jim Curtiss's grave and he'd put up a head board big enough for all to see that the back-shooting murderer of old Jim had met up with another Curtiss.

He closed his eyes trying to visualize how the stern, wind whipped face of Tom Ladd would look when he realized his string had run out. But it wasn't the face of the old rancher that he saw, but the

DAUGHTER FROM HELL!



There may have been a more courageous, beautiful—and treacherous—woman living in the rough-shod days of the old frontier—but you can thank your good God you didn't see her in the flesh! However, meet Julie Malone—surely a woman from hell—in John M. Cunningham's gripping novel, "Claws of the Lawdog's Hellcat," in *Star Western Magazine's* March issue—out February 9!

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white, frightened face of a girl. He grunted, rolled over on his side and went to sleep.

HE WOKE up reaching for his gun. At first he thought that he was cornered, that Tom Ladd and his tough gunnies had trapped him and were yelling for him to surrender. Then the noise clarified and he realized that it was the aged desk clerk kicking on his door and shouting for him to come out. The room was black and he groped for the lamp on the nearby table realizing that he had slept the afternoon away. He touched a match to the wick and made for the door in the flickering, smoky light.

The desk clerk stood framed in the doorway, scowling over his spectacles at Ernie. The old man grunted, "I thought you was dead. There's a lady up front wanting to see you mighty urgent. Says her name is Linda Adams. I'll tell her you'll be out."

He did not bother to answer. He jerked on his boots and was buttoning his shirt as he left the room. He half ran down the dark corridor toward the dim lights of the lobby. He saw her there by the clerk's desk and she looked like the image he'd seen that night, like she'd looked when he had spoken to her father, white and tense with a fear that only a woman whose security is threatened can know. Even as he walked toward her he found himself comparing her with the laughing girl with mischief in her eyes that he'd first seen that morning and he silently cursed the farmers for bringing women to this devil's pit.

He said brusquely, "What's up?" sensing what she was about to tell him, knowing instinctively that Tom Ladd and his riders had struck the first blow while he slept.

"Ernie," she said tightly, "it's happened. It came like you said it would, almost as soon as we got our wagon onto our land. Tom Ladd's riders took us by surprise.

They came out of nowhere, shooting and yelling and cursing Dad for trying to settle on the tract we bought. They killed one of the mules and when Dad tried to stop them they rode him down and ran their horses over him."

A chill swept through him and gave way to a sudden, savage anger as he looked at the frightened and exhausted girl. He said, "How many riders? Who else was hit tonight?"

The girl shook her head. "There was three of them at our place, maybe more at the others. We saw two fires across the creek so we know the others were attacked, at least some of them. Dad isn't hurt bad, Ernie. He wants to fight now. He sent me to get you and bring you back. He said you were right about Tom Ladd and you were the man to plan the fight."

Ernie nodded. He said quietly, "Take my room for the night. You're spent. I'll get a horse at the livery stable and ride out to your place. You better stick in town until you hear from me or your pa because all hell is gonna break loose in the valley and it won't do to have women underfoot. We'll send the other women and kids in, too." He turned then and headed for the door.

"Ernie!" she called after him and when he turned she added timidly, "take care of yourself, Ernie—and Dad, too."

He nodded, feeling good that she should ask it. "I can handle this," he said, and meant it for he was not a man to doubt himself.

He walked out into the darkness and headed across the street for the livery stable. A gaunt, gray man in faded overalls met him in the huge doorway that led into the sagging barn. Ernie said, "I want a horse, friend. A fast horse. I'll pay the price."

The oldster nodded, squinting at him in the dim light of the lantern hanging beside the door. He said slowly, "You're Ernie Curtiss, old Jim's boy. You look like him.

I heard Bannock's man, Kelso, sayin' you were back."

Ernie nodded impatiently, "You guessed it right, friend. Now let's have that horse."

The hostler turned and headed toward a stall inside the barn, Ernie following at his heels. "I knowed Jim Curtiss," the old man offered. "We come up the trail together four years ago when Bannock first put up the valley land for sale. Most of the farmers went back to where they came from when the trouble started but I didn't have nothing to go back to. I took a job with Bannock here at the livery." He took a saddle off the rail of the stall.

Ernie said, "I thought Bannock was in the real estate game."

The oldster laughed, a dry, bitter sound. "It's hard to figure just what Bannock's game is, mister. He owns this livery, he owns the hotel where you stayed and the saloon where you drank. He dam' near owns the town and I reckon he'll own the valley too because Tom Ladd's about done for."

Ernie said bleakly, "That's right. Ladd's about done for, friend."

The hostler swung the saddle on the back of a dun mare and cinched it tight. He said, "Was a time I hated old Tom, but I reckon he ain't all to blame for the trouble out there. When the first settlers moved in four years ago, Tom Ladd was running two thousand head of sows and hiring a dozen riders. Then the big fuss started and when the farmers pulled out old Tom had about fifteen hundred cows and less than ten good men on his payroll. The farmers have come in twice since then and each time they've been forced out, but they take part of old Tom with them. Reckon he ain't running a thousand head and I hear he owes for them. Range fights come purty high, kid."

Ernie's hand dropped to his thigh, brushing the heavy, low-thonged forty-five. He said coldly, "Dam' right they

come high, mister. The first one cost me my dad. That range coyote, Ladd, tried his rought stuff again tonight without even givin' the farmers time to unload their wagons. This fight's gonna come high, too, for Tom Ladd."

The old hostler turned around to face Ernie. "You're loco, kid. Tom Ladd nor his men never pulled no raid this day. Ladd's been in town all day. I seen him at the bank in the later afternoon and seen him at Jack's cafe less'n an hour ago. You got a grudge against old Tom and maybe it's right you should have, but keep it clean, kid. Don't blame him for somethin' you know he never done."

Ernie grabbed the oldster by a shoulder, face pale with cold anger. He said, "You talk crazy, old man. Jeb Adams's girl told me what happened tonight. She's got no cause to lie."

The old man shrugged. "She saw some riders maybe, but they weren't Tom Ladd's men. Listen, kid, I been here four years now. I've seen some things that don't stack up. Sure, Ladd's men have fought the nesters and the nesters have stole Ladd's cows and burned his hay. But I say it wasn't Ladd that started it nor the farmers either. I say it was Bannock. He and his men rough up a nester family and Ladd gets blamed. Bannock pulls a raid on Ladd's cows and the nesters get hell for it. And Bannock sets back and grows rich while old Tom Ladd and the farmers fight themselves broke. Hell, kid, I know it for a fact, but if you say I told you I'll call you a liar. I got my own scalp to look after."

There was a rattle of shod hoofs and three riders pulled up at the livery. Ernie recognized Kelso, Bannock's man, and his companion, hardfaced man who had been in the saloon with him that afternoon. There was another rider with them.

The hostler said softly, "That's George Kelso and Sugar Ronson, Bannock's hired wolves. The gent with them is Dally John-

son. He works for Bannock sometimes. You won't find a tougher three, kid."

The gunman, Kelso, sauntered inside the barn. He said, "Take care of the horses, old man. They been pushed hard this night." Then he saw Ernie and he grinned coolly. "Bannock said you figured you and them sod-busters could clean old Tom Ladd's plow without help, kid. Maybe you can, but if you need more guns just holler. Me, I'd like to put a bullet in the back of that curly range wolf."

A disgust and slow anger welled up inside Ernie as he stared at the pale-eyed killer. He said, "I can handle my fight, Kelso. And if I want a man killed I'll do it myself—facing him so he'll know who sent him to his grave."

The gunman shrugged, "See you around, kid." He stalked outside to join his companions. Ernie heard their coarse laughter as they walked down the street. He moved to the doorway and stared after them, watching them disappear inside the box-like office down the street where Jake Bannock ran his real estate business. There was a troubled, uncertain feeling inside Ernie. For four years now he had lived with but one thought in mind—to come back to Concho and kill Tom Ladd. He had planned and trained for the day he would face the rancher over a gun barrel. Now he was not sure of the purpose that had driven him on. It left him floundering and a little hazy in mind.

HE LOOKED at the hostler. "I'm gonna have a talk with Jake Bannock," he said simply. "Keep the horse ready." He rammed his hands deep inside his pockets and stalked off toward Bannock's office.

The blind was half drawn on the single window in Jake Bannock's office and the window was not shut. Ernie stood just outside the ray of light that stabbed through the dirty glass pane and looked at the four men seated around the desk

in the big room. Listening, he heard Kelso's thin, high-pitched voice.

"We rode down on three of them nesters tonight, Bannock," the gunman was saying casually. "We roughed 'em up some, enough to make them fightin' mad at old Tom Ladd. With that tough kid to lead them I'd dam' sure hate to be in Ladd's shoes right now."

Ernie heard Bannock's heavy laughter. "This will finish Tom Ladd," Bannock said gloatingly. "Instead of me selling out to him he'll be forced to sell out to me. I've waited a long time for this day, Kelso. That ranch of his will make a hundred farms. Them nesters will lose those farms they bought today. You and Sugar there will see to that, Kelso. We'll bring in sharecroppers. Why, man, we'll own this whole county and the governor himself will tip his hat when he walks by me."

Sugar Ronson stirred restlessly. "I don't like that tough Curtiss kid hanging around. He won't be easy to get rid of, I'm thinkin'."

Ernie tensed and his hand loosened the forty-five in its holster. He was thinking the same thing himself. He was thinking that they didn't know just how hard he would be to get rid of. He heard Kelso laugh.

"I'll pull him off yore heels, Bannock, the same way I shook his old man off yore tail when he got stubborn. What's it worth to you?"

Ernie moved then. He drew his gun and catfooted it up to the doorway just as Bannock said, "Why, I dunno, George, maybe five hundred."

Ernie said bleakly, "Save yore money for a tombstone, Bannock. Kelso ain't man enough to pull the job."

The room was dead-quiet. There was Bannock, sprawled out in his swivel chair, his big stomach rubbing the edge of the desk and the fear of God stamped on his heavy face; there was Kelso, a thin smile frozen to his ugly mouth, and Sugar Ron-

son's toadlike face screwed up like he was sick. It was the fourth man, Dally Johnson who started the play. He was sitting facing Ernie and he fell out of his chair, drawing and firing as he hit the floor.

The advantage of surprise was gone with Johnson's first shot. Ernie knew this but somehow it didn't bother him. This was his game, and whether it ended with him on his feet or stretched out on the floor did not matter if only he first got Kelso and Bannock. He dropped to a knee and thumbed two fast shots at the gunman, Kelso. He saw Kelso smash against the desk and watched him fall even as he turned his gun on Bannock.

But there were three of them against his one gun and already he saw the shape of it. A bullet slammed into his shoulder, knocking him half out the door, leaving him stunned and sick. Sugar Ronson snapped a shot at him and jumped across the room to squeeze off another. Bannock's fleshy face leered down at him in the smoky light. There was a gun in the big man's hand and a mocking, derisive grin spreading his heavy mouth.

Bannock said, "Take this to hell with you, kid," and the roar of his gun echoed itself in Ernie's brain as the bullet tore into him with sledgehammer force.

It could have ended there, except for a stern-faced man who came hurtling through the door with a big six-gun roaring lead and thunder and yelling insults and goading taunts at the fear-stricken killers. Big Jake Bannock's face turned the color of gray wood ashes, "Get him, men; it's Tom Ladd," but his heart wasn't in it because a bullet had already torn through his sagging stomach and he staggered against the desk, staring at the red spreading stain on his shirt front with a dull stupidity.

Ernie raised himself on an elbow and groped for his gun with numb fingers. He found it even as Sugar Ronson made a run for the door, yelling his fear loudly.

Ernie blocked the door. He raised his gun and eared back the hammer and when Ronson saw him and fired wildly, Ernie grinned and let the hammer fall, and Sugar Ronson fell with it.

Ernie didn't remember passing out but it was the sharp sting of iodine in the raw gash on his scalp that jerked him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes and saw a bald, moonfaced man bending over him and judged him to be a doctor. He shifted his gaze and saw old Tom Ladd standing beside him. The rancher nodded and said gruffly, "I reckon we stopped that trouble in the valley this night, kid. Jess Simms down at the livery hunted me up when he saw you heading for Bannock's office. Jess told me some things he'd been afraid to tell me before. Things I ought to have had sense enough to see for myself if I hadn't been so set against farmers."

Ernie grinned weakly, "Funny," he said, "I came up here to kill you and you wind up saving my carcass from Bannock's lead. I think you're right, mister, there won't be any more trouble in the valley."

He felt a cool hand on his forehead and looked up to see the girl, Linda Adams, looking down at him. She said, "You're hurt, Ernie. You're hurt pretty bad—I guess it's my fault."

He felt embarrassed stretched out there on the table with the girl looking like she could cry over him. He scowled. "Not much, I ain't. I'll be on my feet inside an hour."

He caught her eye and noticed that she was smiling and her eyes were dark with excitement and mischief like the time he had first seen her. She laughed softly, "You know what, mister? If you move out to your farm and we hold ours, we'll be neighbors."

He looked at the girl and said soberly, "Being neighbors is all right—for awhile." The blush that came to her face showed that she knew what he meant.

TALES of the

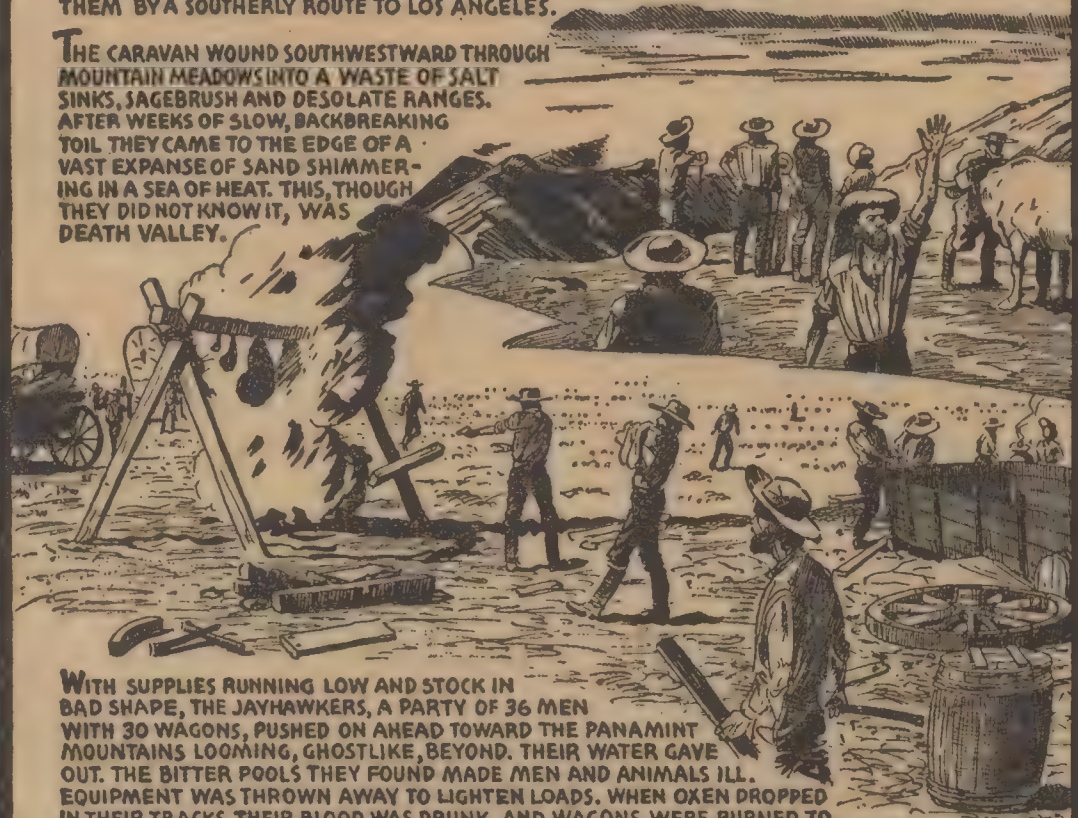
by LEE



SOUTH TO CALIFORNY

LATE IN AUGUST, 1849, AN IMMIGRANT TRAIN OF 200 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN 100 COVERED WAGONS BOUND FOR THE FERTILE VALLEYS AND NEWLY DISCOVERED GOLDFIELDS OF CALIFORNIA ROLLED INTO SALT LAKE CITY. TOO LATE TO ATTEMPT THE DIRECT TRAIL ACROSS THE SIERRAS AND EAGER TO PUSH ON, THEY HIRED A GUIDE TO LEAD THEM BY A SOUTHERLY ROUTE TO LOS ANGELES.

THE CARAVAN WOUND SOUTHWESTWARD THROUGH MOUNTAIN MEADOWS INTO A WASTE OF SALT SINKS, SAGEBRUSH AND DESOLATE RANGES. AFTER WEEKS OF SLOW, BACKBREAKING TOIL THEY CAME TO THE EDGE OF A VAST EXPANSE OF SAND SHIMMERING IN A SEA OF HEAT. THIS, THOUGH THEY DID NOT KNOW IT, WAS DEATH VALLEY.



WITH SUPPLIES RUNNING LOW AND STOCK IN BAD SHAPE, THE JAYHAWKERS, A PARTY OF 36 MEN WITH 30 WAGONS, PUSHED ON AHEAD TOWARD THE PANAMINT MOUNTAINS LOOMING, GHOSTLIKE, BEYOND. THEIR WATER GAVE OUT. THE BITTER POOLS THEY FOUND MADE MEN AND ANIMALS ILL. EQUIPMENT WAS THROWN AWAY TO LIGHTEN LOADS. WHEN OXEN DROPPED IN THEIR TRACKS THEIR BLOOD WAS DRUNK, AND WAGONS WERE BURNED TO SMOKE-CURE THE MEAT. THIRST-CRAZED MEN WANDERED OFF NEVER TO BE SEEN AGAIN.

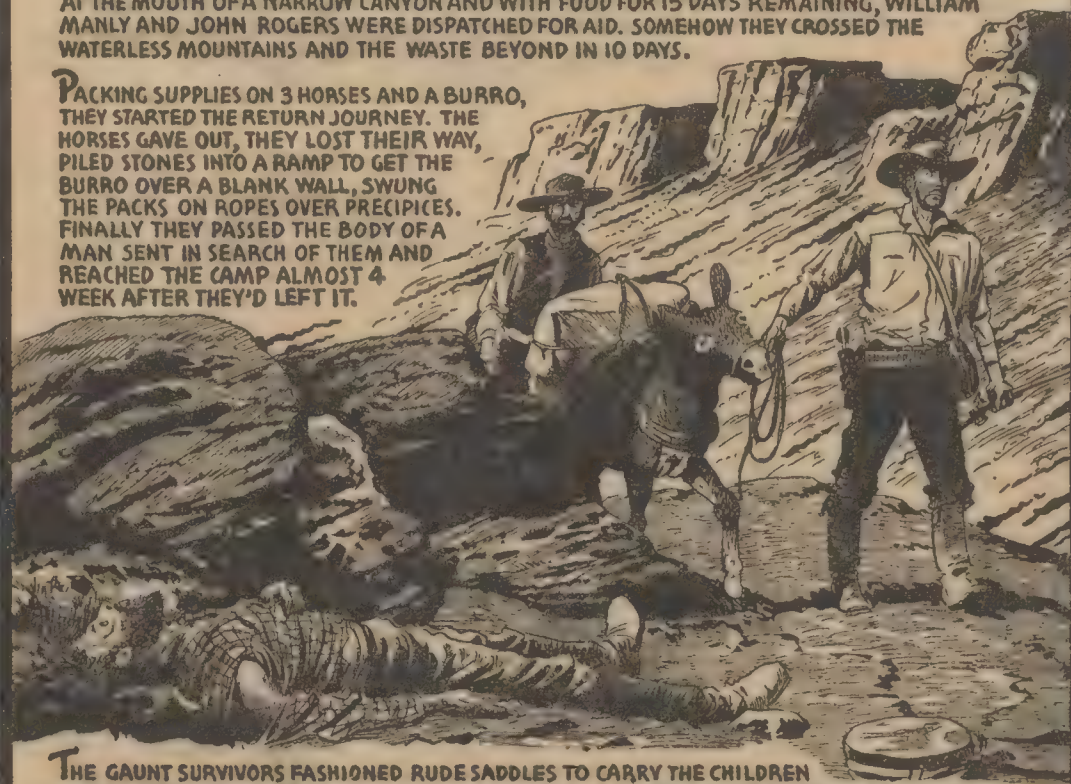
"OLD" WEST



AFTER DAYS OF HORROR, THE JAYHAWKERS REACHED FURNACE CREEK AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAINS. SLAUGHTERING THE REMAINING ANIMALS AND DIVIDING THEIR SUPPLIES, THEY STRUCK OUT ON FOOT, EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF, SEEKING A WAY ACROSS. IN DECEMBER A DOZEN OR SO STUMBLED INTO THE SPANISH SETTLEMENTS.

THE REST OF THE TRAIN, ARRIVING AT FURNACE CREEK IN LITTLE BETTER SHAPE, TURNED SOUTH, HOPING TO FIND A PASS FOR THE WAGONS CARRYING THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN. COMING UPON A SPRING AT THE MOUTH OF A NARROW CANYON AND WITH FOOD FOR 15 DAYS REMAINING, WILLIAM MANLY AND JOHN ROGERS WERE DISPATCHED FOR AID. SOMEHOW THEY CROSSED THE WATERLESS MOUNTAINS AND THE WASTE BEYOND IN 10 DAYS.

PACKING SUPPLIES ON 3 HORSES AND A BURRO, THEY STARTED THE RETURN JOURNEY. THE HORSES GAVE OUT, THEY LOST THEIR WAY, PILED STONES INTO A RAMP TO GET THE BURRO OVER A BLANK WALL, SWUNG THE PACKS ON ROPES OVER PRECIPICES. FINALLY THEY PASSED THE BODY OF A MAN SENT IN SEARCH OF THEM AND REACHED THE CAMP ALMOST 4 WEEKS AFTER THEY'D LEFT IT.



THE GAUNT SURVIVORS FASHIONED RUDE SADDLES TO CARRY THE CHILDREN ON THE REMAINING OXEN, AND LED BY MANLY AND ROGERS MADE THEIR WAY THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS TO REACH LOS ANGELES LATE IN FEBRUARY, HAVING WRITTEN AN EPIC OF RAW COURAGE, DOGGED DETERMINATION AND ENDURANCE UNSURPASSED IN THE HISTORY OF THE WEST.

By CLINT YOUNG



Corbett's pale eyes
narrowed as he said,
"That's a joke, ain't it,
sheriff?"

BACKSHOOT RIGHT OF WAY

Until Sam Bonney's Peacemaker spoke its final piece there were just two kinds of men on that devil's range: the gent who turned his back on a fight—and the gent who shot at it!

THE GUNBELT and the old, battered Peacemaker in its cracked leather holster made no part of Sam Bonney's outfit. The six-shooter had been left to him. Leastways, there'd been nobody to turn it over to when the thirst-crazed desert rat he and Ed had dragged out of the dry stretch west of their quarter-section had cashed in his chips and

ambled off to shake hands with Saint Peter. So they'd stowed his gear in the shed and slung the belt from a nail on the wall of their shack.

It had hung there for nigh onto a year, the dry air splitting the leather in jagged, light-brown seams. But the gun itself had kept in pretty fair condition, needing nothing more than a mite of oil and a cylinder

packed full of brass-rimmed cartridges to be just about as deadly as the Colts worn by Jake McCollum and George Fernald.

Not quite, though, for you don't slap a six-gun on a granger's hip and make a gunslinger out of him any more than you stick Jake McCollum or George Fernald behind a plow and call him a farmer. Or Luke Corbett, Fernald's hired gunnie, or any of McCollum's trail hands, either.

Sam Bonney knew this. His lean, sun-browned face was filmed with sweat, overlaid with a thin layer of dust kicked up by the jogging hoofs of his mount. Dust clung to the damp streaks in his blue work shirt and in the wrinkles of his bib overalls where they puckered in around his waist, drawn tight by the gunbelt. He wiped an impatient hand across his face. His flat-heeled boots dug hard into his horse's ribs, and the animal stretched its jog into a ragged lope, horse and man moving doggedly through the dusk. At this rate, they'd reach Bastrop about ten o'clock.

In an end-of-trail town that's the shank of the evening, when the games are getting into full swing and the cowhands are lonesome and thirsty after months on the trail. Jake McCollum would have given his men an advance on the wages they had coming to them and, relaxing after the long drive from Texas, would be having a few drinks with George Fernald in Fernald's saloon. Cows would bring a good price this year, so McCollum would be mighty pleased when Fernald told him what he was offering. And Fernald, as agent for two of the eastern packing outfits, would figure up his percentage quick-like and signal the bartender to bring over another bottle. They'd have another drink and then they'd be talking about getting together after tomorrow's tally, so Fernald could pay McCollum off for the herd.

Only, one of them wouldn't be there tomorrow.

Sam had passed the creek, its silvery

mirror a half-hour behind him, when he heard the buckboard wheeling toward him out of the darkness. This would be young Doc Ladd, and Sam held to the center of the road to intercept him.

Doc Ladd was a thin-faced, serious young medico who'd been down this way so much recently, delivering the spring crop of offspring to the farmers' wives, that he knew every inch of the road by the way his light wagon jolted over the ruts. At sight of Sam he sawed on the reins and his high-stepping bay ground to a halt.

"Sam!" The girl on the spring seat beside the doctor was leaning forward, peering at him intently. "Sam, how is he?"

Sam swung his horse up beside the buckboard. "You shouldn't have come, Janie."

She lifted her head sharply and Sam caught the faint sheen of moonlight on her firm cheek. "If Ed's hurt, I want to be with him."

"How bad is it?" Doc Ladd asked.

"Damned bad!" Sam growled. "Some dirty son let him have one load of buck-shot in the back and the other in the face, full on!" The deep, frustrated anger that had been riding with him runneled through him now and he cursed softly, forgetting Janie. When he looked up again, he saw her regarding him steadily and he said, "Climb up behind, Janie. I'm takin' you back to Bastrop."

She shook her head stubbornly and Sam stared at her briefly and then pulled his horse away. This was Janie's choice, in a way, her duty as a woman. Ed and Janie Christensen had been courting, with talk of a wedding in the fall. All of the grangers had been looking forward to it, not only because they liked Janie and they liked Ed, but because Janie's father was Russ Christensen, sheriff of Bastrop. It would be nice to have that connection between the cowtown and the farmers south of it.

Now, if Janie's place was anywhere, it was at Ed's side, holding his hand, just being there.

Sam glanced at the horseman who'd stopped just off the tail-gate of the buck-board. "Thanks for gettin' hold of the doc, Tip. When you get to our place, switch that saddle onto a fresh cayuse and stick close to Doc Ladd."

The doc had gathered up the reins of the bay, about to drive on again, but he held them tight as Sam spoke.

"Ask Ed who did it, Doc."

"Don't you know?"

"I got a pretty damned good idea," Sam said thinly, "but suspicion ain't proof. Hell, Ed was unconscious when I found him and still unconscious when I left. But you'll bring him around, Doc. You know how." Raw desperation had crept into his voice and he broke off, fighting the dryness in his mouth, striving to swing his emotions into line. Fear that Ed might die; wild, raging longing for revenge.

"Ask Ed first thing, Doc," he went on quietly. "And when you find out, write it down on a paper, so there won't be any question on it. Give it to Tip and let him bring it to me."

"Where'll you be, Sam?" Tip asked.

"Just ask where Jake McCollum and George Fernald are. I'll be there."

"Hold on, man," Doc Ladd protested. "You can't brace those two alone."

"I won't be alone," Sam informed him. He looked at Janie again. "Sheriff Christensen will be with me. He didn't take it too well when I told him we were fencin' off that trail, but the land's ours and if we don't want them herds crossin' it that's our business!"

"Pretty costly, wasn't it?" Janie asked softly.

Sam nodded dumbly for a moment. "Only thing about it," he said finally, "is that it will pull your father over onto our side."

THE oil lamp was burning in the sheriff's office and the door was standing open as Sam Bonney draped the reins over the chawed hitch-rack and tramped across the plank walk. Janie's father was sitting at his desk, his chair turned to face the door. He was a tall, heavy man, his gray hair damp under the sweat band of his pushed-back Stetson, and he nodded to Sam as if he'd been expecting him.

"Janie told me before she rode out with Doc Ladd," the sheriff said evenly. "I'm sorry, Sam." Sam said nothing and he asked, "When did it happen?"

Sam pulled a chair around and sat on it, spraddle-legged, his arms crossed on the back. The sheriff's eyes dropped to the gun at Sam's waist and his under lip jutted out and his face became even more serious.

"Put a time on when Jake McCollum shoved his trail herd through and you'll come pretty close," Sam told him. "We posted the signs yesterday and strung a few strands of wire across the trail. And when I went out there about sundown tonight, the signs were gone and the wire'd been cut. And I found Ed, shot to hell!"

He glanced angrily at Sheriff Christensen and when the sheriff's hands lifted, palms up, and then dropped back, his jaw set; and he felt the dark flush come into his cheeks. "Go on," he murmured bitterly. "Say you told me Jake McCollum would be first up the trail this year!"

"It ain't that," the sheriff said. "Any other drover would have done the same thing, pushed on through and fought it out with you up here, in the courts." He regarded Sam skeptically. "What was Ed supposed to do?"

"Nothin'. Not a damned thing! He was supposed to let them go and then ride back and tell me. We were comin' up here to you to swear out a warrant for trespass." Sam paused and wet his lips. "But

some blasted hombre got to Ed first!"

"You saying it was Jake McCollum?"

"I ain't sayin' it was anybody. But if it wasn't McCollum it was George Fernald or that gunslinger of his, Luke Corbett, which is the same thing!" Sam got to his feet and spun the chair against the wall. "Ed wasn't doin' any talkin' when I headed this way, but Doc Ladd will bring him around. And when he does he's sendin' Tip Yaeger up here with the name of the man who shot him."

"How can you be so sure Ed'll know?"

"Ed had a shot at him," Sam answered. "The first buckshot load took him in the back, but he managed to swing around and get off one shot. The second blast hit him in the face, so he saw the lousy hombre who squeezed the trigger." He turned toward the door, jerking his head for the sheriff to follow. "When Tip gets here, you and me are goin' to be right with the gents who might have done it. Nobody's goin' to skedaddle out of this!"

Fernald's saloon covered half of the next block, a deep, one-story structure, with a couple of oil torches stuck on poles out in front, their pulsing flare casting long, irregular shadows over the scattering of horses tied at the rail. The rhythmic hammering of the piano far at the back echoed hollowly out into the street, the sound brightening momentarily as the batwings broke outward and a drunk staggered out, turning aimlessly in the direction of the livery.

Later on in the season, when the trail herds piled into Bastrop one on top of another, the street and the walk would be crowded with Texans and near-Texans, and a man would have to fight his way through the throng to get a drink at the bar inside. But tonight the place was over two-thirds empty, McCollum's crew and a few townspeople being the only customers.

The first face Sam recognized belonged to Luke Corbett at the back end of the

bar. Corbett put his drink down when he saw them and stepped out into the middle of the room, waiting.

"Lookin' for somebody?" he asked when they came even with him.

"Yes," Sam said flatly. "You."

Corbett's pale eyes narrowed and he studied Sam, as if wondering if this was something he should take offense at. After a moment, he grinned faintly. "That's a joke, ain't it, sheriff?"

Russ Christensen shrugged. "Where's Fernald?"

"Back in his office."

"Jake McCollum with him?"

"Last I seen he was." Corbett would have turned away but Sam reached out and grabbed his arm.

"You, too, Corbett," Sam said.

Fernald's gunnie jerked his arm free of Sam's grasp. He eyed the old gunbelt and Peacemaker at Sam's hip and he said softly, "You're packin' too much weight, ain't you, farmer?"

"Sam's got something on his mind, Corbett," the sheriff put in swiftly. "We want to see you, McCollum, and your boss. Suppose you lead the way."

It was a graceful out and Corbett took it, but he stared long at Sam before he swung around toward the office, a sullen bafflement in his eyes.

Up to now, Sam Bonney had moved surely and purposefully. Ed had been shot so badly he was like to die, and one of two men had either bushwacked him personally or was responsible for it. But as he crossed the threshold into Fernald's office, his first doubts assailed him. *Suppose Ed couldn't identify the backshooter?* Ed might have whirled around, firing blindly, just as the skunk let go with the second barrel.

It wouldn't be enough to say Jake McCollum had his reasons or George Fernald had them. Sheriff Christensen would want more than that before he'd clap either one of them into jail. He'd want

direct proof, and the only proof could come from Ed himself. Sam had scouted hastily for sign, running over the rocky ground, but he'd guessed quickly that the would-be killer would have headed for the cattle trail, knowing that the advancing herd would be sure to obliterate his tracks.

The one card he held was that Ed had been left for dead. But Ed wasn't dead and the backshooter didn't know that. Sam had warned Tip Yeager to keep it mum, to tell Doc Ladd to get his rig from the livery saying he was going out on a routine call. Janie knew and she'd informed her father. But that was all. Tip would have told him if it had been otherwise.

Luke Corbett stepped into the room, and then Sheriff Christensen followed by Sam.

FERNALD'S office was a rough square, with a window in the left side wall and a door opening on the loading platform out in back. A desk was in the right rear corner and Luke Corbett went directly to it, turning and hitching himself to a half-sitting position on top of it.

McCollum and Fernald were at the table in the center of the room, a bottle and glasses before them. Fernald was a stocky man of medium height with a square, florid face that was bisected by a close-cropped sandy brush of a mustache. He looked up at them with the unreadable gaze of a gambler and asked, "What's on your mind, gents?"

The sheriff raised his eyebrows at Sam. "You want to tell 'em?"

Sam nodded briefly and took a chair at the table. Fernald leaned back, glanced quickly behind him at Corbett by the desk, then swung his eyes back to Sam. Jake McCollum, tall, trail-worn and tired-looking, leaned forward impatiently.

"If it's about me trailin' my cows across your land," Jake's deep voice drawled, "I just been tellin' Fernald about it."

"We figured you'd sort of changed your mind, Sam," Fernald said mildly. "End of last year you were telling everybody you aimed to close off that trail, that this year the trail-herds would have to shoot west of your boundary."

"What makes you think I decided different?"

Fernald shrugged. "You didn't try to stop Jake."

"You'd call postin' signs and stringin' wire not tryin' to stop him?" Sam demanded.

"There weren't any signs," McCollum said flatly. "No wire, neither. I rode ahead of the point, expectin' to find the trail blocked, but the way was clear so I came on in to Bastrop and let the herd follow."

"Corbett." Fernald gestured toward him and the gunslinger shifted lazily on the desk.

"Fernald was interested, so he sent me down there to check for him," Corbett said. "I can vouch for McCollum's story. No signs and no wire. I met Jake where the trail goes onto your land and we rode back together."

The sheriff was regarding Sam narrowly. His Stetson was in his lap and he ran his fingers through his gray hair, a thoughtful pucker between his eyebrows.

Sam spread his hands flat on the tabletop and ran his eyes across the raised tendons. Either they were all in on this or one of them was lying. It depended on who got there first, for the first one could have shot Ed, cut the wire, and destroyed the signs. Then, when the second man came along they could have ridden into Bastrop.

Maybe now was the time to mention Ed.

But Fernald spoke. "If you insist on barring that trail, Sam, it's going to be

damned bad for all of us." His tone was matter of fact, but his eyes bored into Sam's coldly. "McCollum's got more herds following this one. If he has to cut a new trail through that stretch west of you, adding at least three days where there's little grass and no water at all, he's going to look around for another market. And the rest of the drovers will follow him. I offered to buy your land to prevent just that. For when the herds stop coming this town's going to dry up and die. Every cent I've got is tied up here. I won't get ten cents on the dollar for what I own and I'll be right back where I started fifteen years ago."

"Fernald's right," McCollum said. "We can put enough pressure on the railroad to build a cut-off east of here and shoot a spur south. Means we won't have to spend so long on the trail, either."

Sheriff Christensen dropped his hat on the floor beside him. "No, McCollum," he agreed dryly, "but it'll take the railroad a year to make up its mind and then they'll have to lay a hundred or so miles of track. What will you do in the meantime? And when the road's in you'll take a price cut on your cows because of the longer haul."

"But if I sell out to Fernald, or if I can be scared into sellin' out, then everything will be fine, won't it?" Sam said thinly. "Only it ain't goin' to work out that way. My brother Ed was over there today, watchin'." He paused, his eyes raking over them for some reaction, but there was none. "Some damned dry-gulcher sneaked up behind him and filled him with buck-shot." He watched them again, but they were motionless, staring at him. Or had Corbett's jaws tensed?

"The point is," the sheriff broke in, "that Ed ain't dead. Doc Ladd's working on him now, and when he brings him around he'll ask Ed who shot him. Tip Yeager'll ride up here with the word."

Luke Corbett slid down off the desk.

"So that's why you wanted me here." He moved toward the door.

"Stay where you are, Corbett!" the sheriff snapped.

George Fernald rubbed the tips of his fingers over his small mustache, the grating noise sounding loud in the silence of the room. He looked obliquely at Corbett, then his eyes flicked between Sam and the sheriff.

Jake McCollum lifted his big hand and slammed it on the table. His mouth opened to protest and then, sensing the uselessness of it, closed again.

The sheriff said, "It may be a long wait, gentlemen. Any of you have anything you want to say?"

McCollum shook his head curtly and Fernald whispered, "Not me, sheriff."

"Sure of that?" the sheriff insisted.

THERE was no answer at all this time. A chair scraped as Luke Corbett pulled one out from the wall and sat on it. George Fernald and Jake McCollum were almost side by side at the table, and almost in unison their heads swiveled slowly and they stared at each other.

Sweat began to form on Sam's palms and he wiped them dry on the pants of his overalls. Later, when the overhead lamp began to smoke, he stood up on his chair and turned it down.

The wooden ashtray in the center of the table was littered with butts and the sound of life in the saloon beyond the door had died away long since. Fernald had torn his shirt collar open at the throat and his fingers drummed incessantly on the table. McCollum had sat almost without moving for the whole period, but his shirt was sweat-stained at the shoulders and across the front.

Sam moved restlessly and then crossed to the window and threw it open. A deep, pervading quiet lay on the town. Then he heard it, faint, distant. The pounding of

hoofs, growing closer and then breaking on them as the horse dashed pass the mouth of the alley.

"Back here, Tip," Sam called as footsteps tramped into the saloon. He had the door open and he stood there waiting until Tip put the folded paper in his hand. When he turned back into the room, the sheriff was standing behind his chair. Luke Corbett let his chair tilt forward until the front legs hit the floor with a soft thump. Fernald and McCollum had pushed back, their eyes fixed on him.

"Just a minute, Sam," the sheriff said quickly.

Luke Corbett rose slowly. "Get this, farmer," he muttered. "I had nothin' to do with it. When I got down there Jake McCollum had started toward Bastrop and I fell in beside him."

"Blast you!" McCollum put his hands on the table and pushed himself erect. "You accusin' me? Bastrop's your town, Fernald, not mine! I'll get along marketin' my beef elsewhere!"

Fernald slammed to his feet, his face dark with anger. "We're trying to pin it on nobody, McCollum."

"Shut up, Fernald!" the sheriff snapped. "I had word that the drovers got together a kitty of two thousand dollars, McCollum. They sent it along with you to offer Sam and Ed for the right of way over their land for the season."

"Sure, sheriff," McCollum admitted swiftly. "I knew that was what you were anglin' for back away when you asked if any of us had anythin' more to say. But, hell, I was tryin' to figure it all out and I was scared to mention it." He wet his lips and his eyes flicked to the paper in Sam's hand. "That paper will tell the story, Sam, but before you read it, I'm offerin' you that two thousand."

"Keep it," Sam said softly, unfolding the paper.

No one breathed, no one moved, and then Sam looked around blindly at them

and his hand jerked at his six-gun. McCollum's Colt was in his hand and the slug smashed into Sam's arm.

The force of it wheeled Sam around and he tripped and fell heavily to the floor. He was shoving himself up when he heard McCollum's voice, tense and rock-hard.

"Don't move, none of you!"

McCollum said, "I'd have got away with this if Corbett hadn't showed up before I could go back and make sure I'd finished Ed Bonney off."

Sam didn't hear the rest of what McCollum was saying, for Luke Corbett was staring at him fixedly. The gunman's eyes moved to the chair near Sam's feet and in an instant Sam had drawn in his legs and smashed them against the chair. The chair banged into the table and the table slammed against McCollum.

The room reverberated with the rocking blast of six-shooters.

He saw Jake McCollum then, bent over the edge of the table, and the tight grin on Corbett's face as he thumbed back the hammer.

McCollum jerked backward, losing his grip on the table, and then he toppled over and slipped from Sam's sight.

Sheriff Christensen helped Sam to his feet.

"That two thousand's still yours, Sam," Fernald told him, "and I'll add a thousand to it if you'll let the herds through."

The sheriff picked up his hat and put it on. "It's a good thing Ed saw who it was shot him or we'd never have been able to pin it on McCollum." He reached for the note in Sam's fingers.

I'm sorry, Sam, the sheriff read, *but—* He stopped and looked at them in surprise and then went back to the note. *I'm sorry, Sam, but you'll never know who shot him. Ed died without regaining consciousness. Doc Ladd.*

Sam nodded, and then he raised his good arm and wiped his hand across his face.

Three Hombres From Hades

When three gents who'd ridden side by side on the broad trails beyond the law came to the straight an' narrow—their guns had to spell out which one had room to ride on!



He knew they wouldn't be
back — not tonight. . . .

AT FIVE o'clock they came into town, three of them, riding straight in their saddles and looking neither to the right nor to the left. When they got to the Pioneer Saloon they hitched their

horses at the rail, got off and went in.

Jody Baker watched them from an eating house across the street. He had known they would come. It had taken time, almost a year to catch up with him, but he

By CLIFTON ADAMS

had known they would sooner or later. It wasn't long before they came out of the saloon, three abreast, the same way they had ridden into town.

The man in the middle was the largest. A black hat shaded most of his face, but Jody didn't have to see the face to know what it looked like. It would be shapeless and pasty, the nose and ears like lumps of putty pushed into a blob of dough. His voice would be dry and there would be a little tic at the corner of his left eye when he got nervous. His name would be Jay Larson.

He was the dude. Where the other two were dusty and saddle weary, Jay Larson's black coat and serge pants managed to have a look of freshness. His boots shone, and even the six-gun seemed to gleam at his thigh.

The other two men were brothers. They were both lean and gray-faced. They were not men to talk much. If there was any talking that needed to be done their .45's would do it. One was Sam Tracy, the other Bat. Not quite a year ago there had been another brother. Roy Tracy had been found on a creek bank in Oklahoma with a .45 bullet in his middle and his money belt empty. To the Tracy brothers' way of thinking that left the books unbalanced. It would take another dead man to balance the ledger.

Jody Baker watched them as they marched up the boardwalk to the next saloon. They didn't seem to be in a hurry. They had been on the trail for almost a year, and now that they were close they could take their time. But it wouldn't be long before they found him. Somebody would be able to recognize him by his description, even if he was going by another name.

The smart thing to do would be pack up and get out as quickly as he could. It didn't make any difference if he hadn't killed Roy Tracy. They thought he had and that was all that mattered to them.

But sometimes a man gets tired of running. He had made up his mind a long time ago that this time would come, and when it did he wasn't running.

From the window of the eating house he watched the three push through the batwings of the next saloon and go in. Jody gave them enough time to have their look around and then he headed in that direction.

The place had the dank smell and drifting layers of cigar smoke of all saloons. There were a few men at the bar in front, but nobody that Jody knew. In the back of the place a roulette wheel clacked over the chanting of the croupier. A couple of poker tables were getting a play, but for the most part business was slow. There were some scattered tables between the end of the bar and the gambling space. The Tracy brothers and Jay Larson sat at one of them.

Larson saw him first. That blob of a face jerked up and instinctively his hand shot down for his gun. Sam Tracy snapped something from the side of his mouth and hacked the arm away. He stood up and his thin mouth turned up in a grim smile.

"Jody Baker," he said softly. "We haven't seen our old partner for a long time, Jody. We never figured to find you in a place like this." Sam Tracy hadn't bothered to shave for several weeks and the lower part of his face was covered with dusty beard. The false smile went away and then the beard parted in a grin of anticipation.

Jody looked at the faces carefully. Two of them said hate. He wasn't sure what Jay Larson's said. He pulled a chair back and sat down. "That's funny. I got the idea that you'd been trailing me."

Sam Tracy slouched back in his chair. "Now what could have given you an idea like that? We haven't got anything against you, Jody boy."

"Yeah," Bat Tracy said softly. "Why

would we have anything against you? You think we'd hold a grudge against a man just because he killed our brother and stole every penny we had?"

Jay Larson leaned across the table and pushed his putty face close to Jody's. "A forty-five hole," he said hoarsely, "right in the gut, the way Roy got it. That's what you're going to get."

"Shut up, Jay," Sam Tracy drawled. He scratched his beard for a minute and thought. "Jay's got an interest in this because he lost the money he got for his cattle. But I figure Bat and me have more interest because we lost a brother, too." Two stony eyes looked straight into Jody's. "It's too bad you had to do it, Jody. I always kind of liked you."

Jody pulled his chair up closer and poured himself a drink. His hands were steady, but that didn't show what was going on inside him. He tried to think. Now his very life depended on what he said, and he couldn't bring a thing to mind that he hadn't thought of before. They wouldn't try anything here. But sooner or later they would kill him and there wasn't a thing that he could do.

Finally he said very slowly, thinking his way as he went, "I didn't kill Roy. I don't expect you to believe that from the way I acted, but when I heard that Roy was dead and you three were after me I knew that you'd be too hot to listen to words, so I ran."

The Tracys didn't say anything. Jay Larson started to but a look from Sam stopped him.

"I've thought it over a hundred times," Jody went on. "I don't know. The five of us pitched in together to make the drive to Dodge. We sold our cattle, and when we got dust in our throats on the way back we decided to get a few shots in town—all but Roy. We left our money with him and the next time he was seen he was dead and the money was gone."

He wasn't going over it for the Tracys'

benefit, or Larson's. He was just trying to get it clear in his own mind.

"You've got a good memory," Sam Tracy said. "But you're forgetting one little thing, those Fort Worth boots that you put so much store by, the ones with the star on the sole. When we found Roy we found footprints. There were stars on them like on your Fort Worth boots."

"A lot of people wear Fort Worth boots." His voice sounded urgent in his own ears. "Jay wears good boots, where does he get his?"

"They come from Chicago," Jay said dryly, "if it's any of your business."

Sam Tracy got up from the table. "We've talked long enough and we've got it all figured out in our minds."

Jody sat where he was. Then suddenly he said, "How long do you figure to stay in town, Sam?" It wasn't just a question to play for time. He really wanted to know, like a prisoner watching the gallows and marking off the days.

Sam's bearded face looked down at him. "It won't be long. We've got a job to do. After that's over there won't be any need of staying."

Jody watched the three of them walk to the front. Big Jay Larson in the middle, Sam Tracy on the right and Bat on the left. They pushed through the batwings and disappeared outside.

BUSINESS in the saloon went on as usual, but Jody didn't notice. He sat at the table and had another drink. It hadn't been any good. He had known all along that it wouldn't be any good trying to talk to them, but that was all he could do. It wouldn't help to run. They'd catch him again. He left a silver dollar on the table and walked slowly toward the front of the place.

It was quiet outside. He didn't see anything of the Tracys or Jay Larson. But they were watching from some window, or some doorway.

It was almost dark now. An orange sun settled in the west behind the buildings and shot the gray sky with blood. The hot prairie wind that had swept the dusty street in the afternoon had settled to a whisper—little chilled fingers of a breeze that slithered across your face and up and down your back.

Jody stood there in the front of the saloon, and watched and listened. There was nothing. He waited there until the last traces of the sun had gone and the street was dark. Then he went back into the saloon, walked straight through it and out the back door. Maybe he could lose them that way. Another day—if he had another day maybe it would give him time to think. He hurried behind the buildings to the back door of his rooming house and slipped inside.

Upstairs, he locked himself inside his room and leaned against the door. He was breathing hard. He hadn't seen anybody. Maybe he had got away from them, maybe he could have tonight to figure things out. Then it came to him that anybody in town could tell them where he lived, all they had to do was ask. He dropped wearily onto the bed and stared out the window at the empty street.

Why was he breathing so hard? They couldn't get to him here, the landlady kept the front and back doors locked. And then he noticed the front porch outside his window. If they wanted to they could climb up the porch and have a clear shot at him there. You tell yourself that you'll figure out something like this when the time comes. But it's not easy to think when you know a gun may be at your back, a finger may at that moment be squeezing a trigger.

He didn't light the lamp. He sat in the darkness to one side of the window and watched. There were noises from a saloon a couple of doors down the street, now and then the sound of hoofs or boots in the darkness. That was all.

He got up from the bed, got his .45 off the wall. It didn't help much, but he buckled it on anyway and went back to the window.

He didn't know how long he sat there, but it must have been a long time because the noise in the saloon had quieted down. His eyes began to ache and jump from peering too steadily into the darkness. He got up again, took the mattress off the bed and put it in front of the door. He got some blankets out of the closet and made a roll as long and as wide as a man, put it on the bed and covered it. If it was dark enough it might fool somebody. He wasn't sure.

It was quiet outside now. Not even any noise from the saloons. He did what he could with the blanket dummy on the bed, then he went over to where the mattress was pushed in front of the door and lay down.

He waited. He watched the window from under heavy lids and listened to the night.

Somewhere a dog barked. An owl flapped its heavy wings, settled somewhere nearby and hooted. A little breeze whispered through the open window. It was cold.

Time passed. It seemed like a lot of it passed, but time is funny and sometimes it will fool you. There wasn't even a breeze to make a whisper.

Jody wasn't sure just when it was that he first heard the sound. It was so faint that it seemed that it had been there all the time. But then it was a little louder. A little scuffling sound. It could be a dog rubbing his back against one of the porch pillars. Jody didn't think that was it.

Suddenly his lids weren't heavy any more, and he could peer hard into the darkness and his eyes didn't jump. His hand went down and came up with the .45. He waited, tensely.

More scuffling. It seemed to be on the roof of the porch this time. Very careful

scuffing, so careful that it was hardly a sound at all. It moved closer and a shadow fell across the window.

There was a tiny little flash. Like the silent crash of a diamond spitting when it catches the light. Then there was a thud and that was all.

Jody jumped up from the mattress, his .45 ready. He rushed to the window. The scuffing was suddenly a clatter on the low roof of the porch, then it was nothing. A faint sound of boots running somewhere in the darkness, but nothing to see, nothing to shoot at. For a long time he crouched there at the window, his gun ready. He knew there was nothing out there now but he stayed anyway.

Finally he let out the air he had been holding and it whistled between his teeth. He gulped more air in. His lungs were burning. He must have been holding his breath for a long time. At last his arms relaxed and his hand loosened on the gun and he knew they wouldn't be back, not tonight.

He dropped the .45 into the holster and went over to the bed and looked down at the blanket dummy. He'd still be able to use the blankets but they weren't as good as they used to be. The hole wasn't very big, just a neat little woolen wound that fit snugly against the sides of a hunting blade. Jody pulled the knife out and felt the keen edge thoughtfully. Jay Larson was the knifer of the trio. He looked closer at the dummy. The holes were placed just about where the throat would be if the dummy had been a man.

The next morning wasn't any good. The sun was out, kids played, dogs barked. That doesn't make any difference if you haven't slept for twenty-four hours. It wasn't any good. As the first piece of sun slanted through the window Jody got up and put the mattress back on the bed. He wondered if they would try it again today. Would it be a knife again, or a gun—would it be in the back?

He kept his gun buckled on and went downstairs. Before he went outside he scanned the street, not sure about anything. But he couldn't stay inside the rest of the day, he would have to get out sometime.

HE FINGERED the thin roll of bills in his pocket and thought about breakfast. He had made a drive to Kansas and had come back with a little money, but it was about gone now. From the way things looked, he wouldn't have time to spend much money anyway, so it didn't make any difference. He decided against breakfast. His stomach muscles pulled tight and his neck and back ached from the strain of staying alert through the night. Breakfast wouldn't set well on a stomach like that. He walked away from the rooming house and made for the livery stable at the end of the street.

The liveryman didn't know anything about the three men, but he had their horses back in the stable. Jody didn't know what he thought the horses could tell him about it but he went back to look at them anyway.

The horses weren't hard to find. They were branded and Jody had seen the Tracy and Larson brands enough to know them when he saw them. At first nothing happened. They didn't tell him a thing. Three horses, freshly brushed, munching oats, and that was all. When the idea did come it hit like a hammer and he cursed because he hadn't thought of it before.

"The men that left these horses here, you don't have any idea where they are?" he said to the hostler.

The old man shook his head. "Can't say. They was three of 'em I remember, but can't say where."

The liveryman stopped. Jody felt someone at his back near the doorway of the stables. He turned quickly and Sam Tracy said, "You looking for us, Jody?"

The three of them came into the stable, walking three abreast the way they had ridden into town. They stopped a few feet from Jody and spread out. It seemed a casual move, but it threw up an effective block in case he wanted to get out. For a minute they were silent, then Jay Larson jerked his head at the old liveryman.

"Get out."

The old man stared. "Look here, stranger—"

"Get out," Jay cut in hard. "And make it quick."

Bat Tracy did nothing. Sam took a silver dollar from his shirt pocket and flipped it at the old man. "Here, pop, go buy yourself a beer. We've got a little business to talk over."

The liveryman snipped the dollar out of the air and grinned. "Well, if you put it like that. I got nothing against people talking." He turned and hobbled out the door leaving Jody alone with the three killers.

Some wind whipped in the doorway and rattled loose hay on the floor. Somewhere in the distance was the ringing of a blacksmith's hammer. The three stood motionless. After a minute Jay Larson said hoarsely, "What are we waiting on?"

Sam smiled faintly in that lazy way of his, his right hand hanging lax beside his gun. "We don't have to tell you, Jody, this is it. I'd feel better about it if you went for your gun, but you don't have to. We've got a job to do and we're going to do it. Nothing else makes any difference."

The wind from the doorway felt cold on Jody's face. He opened his mouth to speak and nothing came out. He tried again. "You must be disappointed that the knifing didn't come off, it would have been so much quieter that way."

Sam and Bat looked puzzled. Nothing about Jay Larson moved. Finally Sam Tracy said, "What knifing was that? Not that it makes any difference."

"Last night somebody climbed up on the porch to my window and buried a six-inch blade in a dummy I had on the bed. Didn't Jay tell you boys about it?"

The two Tracy's looked at Larson. "No," Sam said softly, "I guess it must have slipped his mind."

Jay Larson's face puffed and got red. "Sure I did it," he blurted. "If it had come off it would of been quick and easy."

"It's all right, Jay," Sam said easily. "I just thought maybe you should have told us. It doesn't make any difference. Are you going for your gun, Jody?"

Jody made no move toward his gun. He had to talk fast now. He lined the things up quickly in his mind and said, "After that knifing last night I began to wonder about things. I started looking around this morning, Sam, and I think I found something you and Bat would like to know about."

Sam shook his head. "It's not any use, Jody, you can't talk your way out of it. This is the last chance I'm giving you. Go for your gun."

"Look, Sam," Jody said quickly, "do you ever brand your personal things with the iron you use on your cattle and horses?"

Sam Tracy was just curious enough to hesitate for a minute. He turned it over in his mind and said, "Yeah, I guess everybody does. So what?"

Jay Larson stiffened and his hand crawled close to his gun. "There's no sense in all this talk. There's only one time to do this and that's now." He made for his gun but Bat Tracy stopped him.

"Just a minute, Jay," Bat spoke up for the first time. "Say your say, Jody, and it had better be good and it had better be fast."

Jody grabbed words. "You say I killed Roy because of those stars in the soles of those Fort Worth boots of mine. Did you ever hear of a cattleman using his brand

(Continued on page 129)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 115)

HOLD up, pardner! Relax a spell, and let's see how much you know about cowboy subjects and the West in general. In short, are you greenhorn or gray beard? Find out by trying your hand at answering the twenty questions listed below. Call the turn on eighteen or more of them correctly, and you're old-timer top-hand material. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer fewer than fifteen, and you land smack in the greenhorn class. Good luck!

1. In cow puncher language, the term, "big house," means jail. Yes or no?

2. If a Western character friend of yours told you he was currently "playing belly through the brush," which of the following would you think he meant: He was dodging the law? He was doing a lot of riding through brush country?

3. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in the "hen wrangler," what would you return with?

4. True or false? "Brand inspector" is the cattleman's term for a rustler who studies cattle brands to see how he can alter them.

5. True or false? "Burro load" is a unit of measure used in the West.

6. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher slang term, "bushwhack?"

7. True or false? A "Chihuahua cart" is a wagon which Mexican cowpunchers use to carry their dogs in.

8. What is the meaning of the Western slang term "choosing match?"

9. A "hand" is a unit of measure used to measure the height of horses. How long is a hand?

10. So far as a herd of cattle is concerned, what is the meaning of the term "head 'em up?"

11. If the ranch boss told you to go out and bring in a "javelina," which of the following items would it be wise to take with you? A gun? A pair of handcuffs? A fishing rod and line?

12. So far as the West is concerned, a "jinete" is: A person who is an excellent rider? A poor rider?

13. Why is an animal known as a "marker" a distinct hazard to a cattle rustler?

14. True or false? A maverick brand is an unrecorded brand, generally placed on an animal by a cattle rustler.

15. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "quisto?"

16. True or false? "Range bum" is a term which the West uses in reference to the professional chuck-line rider.

17. If a Western acquaintance of yours told you he had got "sawdust and tobacco juice" in his beard, what would you think had happened to him?

18. "Scrub" is the cowpuncher's term for what item that is sometimes found out West? (Not a plant.)

19. What is the meaning of the Western expression, "Supaway John?"

20. What's a suicide horse?

BIG TOP BUCKAROO

AT THE south end of the plank bridge across Black River, Eddie Cayou halted his buckskin and stared in awe. Beyond the bridge, strung out along the prairie trail in an uneven line, was an array of red and gold wagons, glittering in the bright sun of this June afternoon: the makings of Tav Milloy's Greatest Tent Shows. Somewhere in eighteen-year-old Eddie's head, a chord of memory twanged.

There had been a circus parade, long ago. Tinsel and spine-tingling music and amazing wild animals. Big cats in cages, and a father holding high a small boy who was himself looking up, Eddie remembered, with absorbed fascination at tawny eyes and the fluid power of lions and tigers. A mother who bought the boy a book, later filled with wonderful pictures of prowling jungle beasts. Eddie wondered now if there were cats with this circus. If so, maybe he could watch them. Eddie was glad, suddenly, that Forest Thrailkill had sent him to size up this layout. More fun than plotting a bank holdup. He felt the gun snugged under his frayed chambray shirt.

Animals? Why, Eddie knew a thing or three about animals himself. He'd catch them along the trail. Teach them tricks. Moments with his wild pets had been the happiest of his law-dodging years. Of course, when it was time to flee the badge toters again, Thrailkill would make him

get rid of them. There'd been Stinky, the Gila monster, Rudolph, the rattlesnake, Brains, the coyote, Charley, the bobcat.

Twitching his freckled nose to get the itch out of it, Eddie nudged Pal, his buckskin pony, onto the weathered old bridge. What was the outfit stopped for?

He was barely across when Pal abruptly shot sidewise in a scared lunge that almost unseated Eddie. He cooled down Pal with horse talk and looked around for the cause. His blue-black eyes widened with boyish amazement. They were bringing up an elephant, halting him at the bridge.

Leaning in the saddle, Eddie rubbed a tattered sleeve over his sweaty face. What was the play here? Af if in answer, the elephant lifted and lowered a cautious forefoot, and eased the weight of it very slowly upon the bridge end; then matched the move with his other forefoot. It didn't make sense at first, but then Eddie caught on. Slicker'n grease on a slide. Why, the smart elephant was trained to test bridges; if he could make it with all his crushing tons, it was a cinch for the heavy wagons.

All four feet on now. Eddie sucked in a breath. Suddenly, then, it happened. Above the river's roar, he heard the splitting crash of a plank. The big animal reared back to the bank with surprising speed for such bulk.

Kneeing Pal on, Eddie saw the man for the first time, stomping furiously back

To win this game where law was a gamble, with a bullet the blue chip, the kid had to make one final choice—a weapon in his hand to ruin his best friend — or a knife in his back if he didn't!

By **ART
KERCHEVAL**



"Drop 'em, or I'll let you have it," he called. . . .

and forth along the riverbank. He was an impressive-looking gent with his big white hat and flowing white mustaches and colossal belly. Eddie guessed this was Tav Milloy. His rapid mind drummed up a way for advancing Forest Thrailkill's scheme. He edged Pal up to the stormy showman.

"Excuse me for buttin' in, mister,"

Eddie began thoughtfully, "but maybe your circus ain't stymied after all."

The big showman snorted, waving his arms in a wide gesture. "Go tend to your cows, son!" he flung at him. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Eddie grinned, worked his nose violently. "Just an idea," he said. "I kinda know this here country, and if you'd back-

track them wagons, till you come out on Twin Yokes Road, you'd be headin' straight for Jericho's Ford. You can cross the old Black easy there. Slicker'n grease on a slide."

Blank-faced suddenly, the circus owner tugged at his mustaches, eyes pinned on Eddie. "How far?" he inquired huskily, with dramatic humility.

"Not more'n three miles," Eddie told him. "Follow me, mister. This here lil' old Black ain't gonna throw us."

"By the gods, you're right! Nothing can whip luck like this." Milloy breathed almost prayerfully: "Lead on m'lad. The show shall go on!"

Chuckling to himself, Eddie headed that procession of turning wagons. A job with the circus was a dead cinch, after the wagons were safe across. Then he could look over the lay for Forest Thraikill. Thraikill would figure he was a smart 'un this time.

Stalking patiently a parallel course through the near-by Bullblood Hills, Thraikill followed, waiting Eddie's word, waiting the moment to strike. "Like a vulture," some folks said of tall, fast-striking Forest Thraikill. That got Eddie's hackles up. Dammit, he'd took Eddie in and raised him, taught him all the tricks, so someday Eddie Cayou could stand on his own two owlhoot feet. Trail pardners, that's what they were. Eddie's lips twisted at the return of a vague memory. If he'd had any other folks, they couldn't matter now.

THEY reached Jericho's Ford, the shallowest point along the widened river. Eddie urged Pal into the lazy current, waved a commanding arm for the wagons to follow. Slick tooling of the drivers crossed the wagons without upsets. Sitting his saddle on the south bank, Eddie had a queer glowy feeling about pulling these folks out of a tight. That was a laugh. Why, that was plumb crazy. Thraikill

would kick him from hell to breakfast for such notions.

Tav Milloy strutted forth, bringing out the glint of silver. Five dollars were clinked into Eddie's unexpecting hands.

"Just a gesture, son, to show old Tav's appreciation." Outwardly sonorous, Milloy's voice had a shaken undertone. "Take it, m'lad, and remember that you have rendered an invaluable service to a sentimental old man." He coughed awkwardly. "Ye gods, when I think how that blasted bridge almost queered the pitch, I shudder to my bunions."

"Queered the pitch?" Eddie blinked his blue-black eyes. This was sure a loco shebang!

"Nearly ruined our chances of playing Black River town on schedule," the showman gruffed.

Eddie clinked the coins right back into Milloy's big palm. "You was in a jam, mister," he said dryly. "I'm not skunk enough to want pay for steerin' you out of it. Some day I might be bogged down, and I'll appreciate a gent comin' along and haulin' me out. Some things it just ain't right to boil down to dollars and cents."

"By all the gods," Tav Milloy orated, "you're an accommodating lad. A gentleman of high courtesy." His voice dropped abruptly while an eyebrow lifted. "And the first lot flea I ever knew to turn down five dollars. What is your name, my boy?"

Eddie told him.

"Your home? Your parents?"

"Ain't got no kin," Eddie stated, truthfully, with the right sprinkle of wistfulness. "Just sort of driftin' around." He let his voice trail off uncertainly, according to the careful plan worked out by Forest Thraikill. As usual, Thraikill was using to their profit Eddie's old act. The honest, wistful look that always got 'em. But inwardly Eddie cursed the ragged duds he had to wear on these jobs, when

he had a first-class outfit that had set him back a couple hundred dim-trail bucks.

"Ah, to be sure," Milloy was rising to the bait. "An orphan of the far-flung ranges, thrust upon the mercy of a mocking world. No sadder story. You want a job?"

"Gosh!" Eddie said hungrily. Eddie thought, *Slicker'n grease on a slide. He's takin' me right in.*

"Get down, Eddie. Get down from that battered saddle, leaving behind you an existence of want and loneliness. We are your friends here. All friends. All one big, happy family."

Swiftly Milloy dragged him from wagon to wagon, introducing him with flourishes to all the circus folk. Then, twitching his nose calculatingly, Eddie rode beside the pompous circus proprietor on the high seat of the treasury wagon, while his horse, hitched to the tail board, trailed along. The treasury wagon. That was what Milloy called it. That sounded like a hell of a lot of money.

"Thanks to you, m'lad, we unload at Black River town by dawn," Tav Milloy was booming, jarring into Eddie's thoughts.

"Big town?" Eddie asked needlessly.

"This whole country's so big, son, it staggers the imagination." The circus man made a sweeping gesture. "Look at it! Black River Valley! With its rich farms and ranches, it fairly shouts prosperity. Harvest and roundup money here, the year round. We shall bestow joy and hilarity upon this land. We will in turn absorb generous gleanings of its prosperity."

The glamor of this roving life began to unfurl before the youngster, until a tall outlaw waiting his word seemed far distant.

Night came as their wagons bounced and rattled across the valley. When Milloy finally fell silent, nodding in evident weariness, Eddie took over the reins. Under the companionable stars, he let his thoughts

run. It was pleasant, drifting along like this, imagining for a time that you were a real part of this wonderland on wheels.

It was the whack across the shoulder that jarred the drowsiness out of Eddie Cayou. Blinking eyes regarded the dawn. Black River town!

"Get down, my lusty roughneck! Earn your salt! It's work from here on!"

It came to Eddie Cayou, soon, that he had never worked so hard in his life. His lean, reluctant back became a watercourse of sweat. Why be such a sucker, he asked himself, when there were easier ways of making a living? Then he reminded himself of the high stakes in this game. Reminded himself to keep on carrying poles from the wagons to the sites marked off by red flags. Ten million of 'em, if necessary. Keep on carrying poles till his back broke.

Eddie drifted out with the milling crowds. Suddenly he saw a curt, meaning nod, and then Thrailkill melted into that jam and jostle of humanity. A towering, grim-faced reminder that jolted Eddie loose from identifying himself with the big show.

But the idea kept gnawing. That night, when the wagons were rolling, Eddie blurted it out to Milloy.

"No foolin', I got a fetchin' way with wild animals, mister! Why, I'd walk around with my pet rattlesnake, Rudolph, coiled around my neck. I'd train Brains, my coyote, to bring my boots for me. Charley, my full-grown bobcat, ate out of my hands."

The big man clucked to his team, chuckled. "Maybe I'd let you be a lion-tamer? Well, some can be and some can't. An animal trainer has got to be born, and then he's got to be made, by endless work and study. I had to work when I had my first cat act in one of the big circuses of the old country."

"I'll learn!" Eddie vowed. "Slicker'n grease!"

"Maybe," Milloy snorted. Then he noticed the droop to Eddie's shoulders, bone-weary from the heavy labor with pole and canvas. "Crawl back in the wagon now, lad, and catch yourself a wee wink. By the gods, you're ready to roll off the seat."

EDDIE eased his sore body inside the wagon, dropped down on the edge of the bunk at one side to tug the boots from his aching feet. What a way to make a living! In the gray light he peered around with distaste at the cluttered interior of the wagon. The treasury wagon, they'd called this! His tiredness suddenly forgotten, Eddie started to prowl as noiselessly as a big cat.

Under a careless pile of junk he found it—a black tin box. He didn't try to spring it open. Enough that it was there. After some thought, he examined the floor—decided he could loosen a couple of boards without much trouble. He fumbled in his war bag to find a spur and pried them free, but left them in place. Carefully, he replaced things the way he had found them.

However, he took no satisfaction in this accomplishment. He lay on the bunk, listening to the jingle of harness, the rumble of the wagon, the full-throated voice of Tav Milloy speaking occasionally to the team. A pretty swell gent, Milloy, different from Forest Thraikill. Making his living this back-breaking way. Believing, himself, his high-flown spiels about his "happy family." Yet maybe it really was a happy family. Eddie Cayou wouldn't know.

What the hell? They'd treated him all right, hadn't they? Took him in and asked no questions and acted as if they liked him. They liked him for himself, too. Not because his boyish face made a good front for sizing up a layout to plunder.

The hell with Thraikill, Eddie thought suddenly. What had he ever got out of their shifting, hunted life together? Oh,

some nice hunks of swag, of course. Fancy gear and an easy, free existence. No aching back and swollen feet. But old Tav might make a lion tamer—an animal trainer, rather, out of him. Maybe.

Almost, Eddie got up to fasten those floor boards down again. Almost—but he would have to do some hammering, make noise, and he was mighty sleepy. In the morning. . . .

The brassy blast of the new sun was upon the painted wagons moving steadily southward. Black River was days back; Samtown was the next stop. Long since they were out of the bountiful valley, bumping over an unpromising sprawl of prairie. "But," Milloy rumbled resignedly to Eddie, "we have to take the chaff with the wheat."

That night, after the show in Samtown, Thraikill loomed suddenly out of the darkness, beckoning Eddie to one side. Eddie went, torn by uncertainty. The floor boards of the treasury wagon were still loose.

"I got no time," Eddie parried. "I got to finish loadin'."

"You'll take time for this," Thraikill snapped. "What's the deal?"

"I don't know," Eddie stammered. "I been workin'. I been watched."

"What's wrong?" Thraikill demanded. He eyed Eddie keenly. "If you can't handle this circus job, kid, we'll go crack a bank someplace. Meet me tomorrow night at the old goatsherd's shack in the Bullbloods. We'll figure what to do. We can't waste any more time on Tav Milloy."

"Okay," Eddie agreed dully, the habit of years claiming him. Besides, Tav might come along any minute.

The next day was even hotter. Tav Milloy shook his head, squinting at the sky. "I don't like it," he declared gloomily. "Don't like it at all. Wouldn't be surprised if old Jupiter Pluvius lets go."

Late that afternoon, Milloy's vague pre-

(Continued on page 123)

Answers to Cattle Country Quiz

(Questions on page 109)



1. No. In cowpuncher language, the "big house" is generally the house owned by the ranch owner.

2. If your Western friend told you he was playing belly through the bush, you should know he was on the dodge from the law.

3. If the ranch boss told you to bring in a "hen wrangler," you should return with a small boy. "Hen wrangler" is a term cowpunchers jokingly use in connection with the small fry.

4. False. A brand inspector is one hired by cattle associations to inspect brands at shipping points, etc.

5. True. 'Burro load' is a unit of measure used in the West. Wood, and other commodities, are sometimes sold by the burro load.

6. The slang term, "bushwhack," means to ambush.

7. False. A Chihuahua cart is a heavy wooden cart with solid wood wheels. It is not a wagon used by Mexican cowpunchers to transport dogs.

8. A "choosing match" occurs when punchers on a ranch select their horses from those available. Generally, the selection is made in terms of seniority, the individual having the most seniority getting first choice.

9. A "hand" is four inches long.

10. "Head 'em up" means to head the lead animal of a herd of cattle in the direction in which the punchers desire the herd to travel.

11. If the ranch boss told you to bring in a *javelina*, better take a gun with you. A *javelina* is a musk hog—a vicious, dangerous animal.

12. A *jinete* is a person who is an excellent rider.

13. A "marker" is an animal that is so peculiarly marked as to be easily recognized by its owner. Hence, if a rustler steals and alters the brand on a marker, the owner of the animal stands ready to recognize it, and perhaps bring the rustler to justice.

14. True. A maverick brand is an unrecorded brand which is generally placed on an animal by a rustler, preparatory to driving the animal off at a later date. If the brand is later recognized as unrecorded, the animal will not be traced to the rustler who branded it.

15. "Quisto" is the Western slang term for quirt.

16. True. A range bum is one who rides from camp to camp and ranch to ranch, bumming free food.

17. If your Western friend told you he had got sawdust and tobacco juice in his beard, this would mean he had been winged with a bullet in a saloon.

18. A "scrub" is a lowgrade animal.

19. "Supaway John" was a term used by Indians when begging food.

20. A suicide horse is an animal which becomes crazed with fear when someone attempts to ride it. Such an animal is a definite menace both to himself and to rider. He may buck into things, etc., in his mad desire to rid himself of the rider.

BADLANDS BUSTER

*Third of
Nine Parts*

Siringo and Coats stayed
with the herd through
stampedes



Charlie Siringo had lived many men's lifetimes before he became a man—and had the notches on his gun to prove it!

CHAPTER THREE

Wild Cowboy Life

WHILE Charlie Siringo was walking on crutches, recovering from the bullet wound in his knee, he hired out to Shanghai Abel Pierce to

ride with his children Mamie and Johnnie, on their way to and from school, two miles from the Rancho Grande headquarters, looking after their ponies and taking care of the small youngsters, "and at the same time I was getting some book-learning attending school myself."

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

This was a note-worthy statement; equally interesting was the attempt of the school-teacher to "convince the other scholars that he wore men's size pants . . . but I pulled a knife and threatened to carve him into mince-meat." He took the Pierce children home, and on the following day "saddled my pony, bade the Pierces goodbye and headed east with my crutch tied to the saddle."

The youthful, exuberant Charlie Siringo was handsome, attractive and swaggering, spirited by independence, quick-tempered, and really gifted with courage, recklessness and endurance. When a rattlesnake bit his foot and his leg swelled too big for his boot, he went on roping mavericks, one foot bare in the stirrup. He put his brand on a herd of mavericks scattered through prairies and timber belts. He sold his brand, a T5 connected, to Fred Cornelius, who built it up to a fortune, and paid Siringo the contracted two dollars a head as the Siringo brand animals came along during the next five years. Immediately on selling a brand, Siringo registered a new one and kept on putting his marks on mavericks. The first return from one new brand came from a big mossyhorn he discovered in the hide-and-tallow herd of a rancher, claiming fifteen dollars for it from the reluctant slaughter-house proprietor.

In 1873, while a wild and harum-scarum youngster, he made lasting friends and unforgetting enemies. Skinning cattle, what matter if they were alive or dead when he found them? He visited his uncle, Nicholas White, in Galveston; and shook hands with Jeff Davis, the former Confederate President, at the first Texas State Fair at Houston. His uncle gave him a repeating Spencer rifle, a scarce weapon.

In September, 1875, his mother heard of his gunshot wound and came on from St. Louis. He met her at Hamilton Point and mother and son pooled their money to build a home. They had their lumber when

the great hurricane of 1875 washed Indianola away, destroyed the Morris schooner, and took the roof off the Morris house in which Siringo's mother was lying sick. Siringo carried his mother through waist-deep water, they got to an osage wind-break, and somehow survived. "Strange to relate, this ducking cured Mother and she forgot about being sick. . . . She begged me to make peace with God, while the making was good . . . I have been too busy to heed. I feel he will overlook my neglect. If not, I will have to take my medicine, with Satan holding the spoon."

In 1874, Siringo hired out to Tom Merrill at thirty-five dollars a month to go up the Chisholm trail to Kansas, taking a herd of eleven hundred mossy-horn steers for the Mackelroy Brothers rounded up on the Navidad river in Jackson county. On the way Siringo and Henry Coats were the only two riders in the crew who could break the wild bronchos, and both riders quit before reaching Austin, when the herd stampeded in a storm due to the short horn riders who didn't know trail-herding and cattle holding.

Siringo and Coats stayed with the herd through stampedes, storms and wild horse breaking for the other so-called riders. In Fayette county, Siringo demanded extra pay for bringing wild horses to saddle-reason; Jim Mackelroy fired him, and Coats followed. Others were turned off, and the herd arrived in Wichita, Kansas, shy three hundred head.

The Texas legislature felt obliged to do something about the innumerable killings, raids, outlaws, and shootings throughout the great domain—256,000 square miles. Under the treaty by which Texas joined the United States, Texas governed itself in internal affairs, clear of the United States Constitution. After due debate and argument, the legislature in 1875 passed a law that apparently nullified the National Bill of Rights provision that "the



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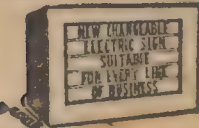


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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." The Texas legislature forbade the carrying of pistols and Charley Siringo was the first violator caught breaking the statute. Arrested, he was fined so heavily he couldn't pay and he went to jail. Then John Pierce came and proffered the required amount, and the twenty-year-old violator took the money as a loan.

W. B. Grimes hired Charlie at thirty dollars a month to help round up a trail herd and head it up the Chisholm Trail through Wichita, Kansas. The winter had not been severe. Relatively few cattle starved to death and skinning hides hadn't paid very well. Charlie owed the money that paid his fine.

The Grimes round-up picked two thousand five hundred steers, five to twenty years of age, on the Navidad and Guadalupe river basins, caught as they left the open prairies to spend days in the timber brakes. A day's take was driven into a corral nearby for the night, but when the herd grew large, it had to be bedded down at night and sung to by cowboys riding around. Wild sport was had, penning the animals in, the riders yelling and quirting their leather chaps to make noise. Obstreperous steers, refusing to go into a pen, were thrown and hobbled with piggin' strings carried on the saddles. Lacking hobbles, the victim was tied with his own tail. Hog-tying was against the rules for it lamed a trail steer. The eyelids of intractable mossy-horns were sewed shut to keep them herded. The thread wore away in two or three weeks by which time the wild-spirited animals were subdued; having run blind full tilt into trees, they were stunned and easily handled.

Charlie wore his boots night and day for two weeks. "They were number fives when they should have been number sixes. Cowboys took great pride in small feet."

BADLANDS BUSTER

Laughter, shouts of glee and outrageous bravado in the face of death—they jammed the live-oak log corrals and split rail ties with cattle as thick as they could stand. Then the boys slept out around the corrals, equal distances apart, rolled up in the bedding and holding hackamore rope or reins, ready for a stampede.

A crash of thunder, lightning flaring across the skies—one night the herd charged through the corral wall where Siringo was stretched on the ground sleeping. He jumped on his horse, and riding ahead of the tight-packed herd, by the lightning flare he saw the fence rails and logs spread out, carried on the backs of the cattle. The boss in the camp had undressed. He leaped to his night-horse and rode, nearly naked and bare-footed, to turn the herd, milling them. His foot caught against a tree, and in the morning Siringo put a toe, which was hanging by cords, back in place and tied it up.

Despite that wound and the raw cold, the boss and Charlie took one bunch and other riders another, when the herd split in a prairie. When day came and the stampede had run its course, the two riders were ten miles from camp. On the way back they found steers with broken legs, one or both horns broken off, a trail of trampled mud. The scattered bunches were united and driven two hundred miles to Austin into the Chisholm trail, which began at the ford across the Brazos river and stretched northward through Ft. Worth, across Red river and Indian territory into Kansas. The Chisholm was the outlet for the salt grass, gulf coast pastures to the north.

BARBED wire had just begun to be stretched on the way, fencing off and even the trail, hundreds of wide. The herd was driven through the barriers in spite of settlers and their dogs. They found Red river in flood tide and

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

drift running, nearly a mile wide. A score of other herds, stopped, spread out in the blackjack pines, the camps half a mile apart. At night the trail crews of cowboys riding around their herds and sitting around their campfires sang their heads off—hundreds of them, their voices wailing in the night. More herds arrived daily, and the state inspector came to collect ten cents a head and to have all cattle not properly branded for the trail turned back into Texas where they belonged.

The inspector was invited to have a cup of coffee; he was set upon, bound and gagged and thrown into the brush. His horse was clipped, mane and tail, and sent homeward. The river had gone down, drift stopped running, and the herd put across the river, saving the \$250 fee.

Siringo stood by while "the yellow cowboys" shoved the Grimes herd down the muddy banks and across the lowering Red river, including about two hundred "strays" picked up on the way across Texas from the Gulf coast. Also, about a hundred English Durham cattle were brought out of the timber and thrown across the river into the Grimes herd.

I stood looking at these beauties with open-mouthed wonder until it was too late to run them back . . . thus adding old dollars to jingle in "Daddy" Grimes' pocket. They were sold in Wichita, Kansas, for big money. The chances are some new settler further down the river had brought this little herd from the east . . . which has left a blotch on my conscience to this day.

The inspector's horse returned home and his wife gave the alarm. Every male citizen in the village old enough to tote a gun went searching for the inspector. He was found in the plum thicket two days later, almost eaten up by flies and mosquitoes and thereafter he sold out his properties and returned to Kentucky.

The Chisholm trail led across Indian Territory, destroying thousands of acres of grass belonging to the Indians, and

BADLANDS BUSTER

Comanche, Kiowa, Wichita, Kickapoo and Cherokee landowners objected in vain. They were entitled to head-fees from each herd "but I don't know if they ever collected," the railroad agent at Everett, ghost town on the west bank of the Missouri river, remarked long afterwards. However, bands of blanket Indians stampeded the herds and collected fresh beef in small token taxes on the raiding herds devastating the Indian lands.

Floods, stampedes, thunder storms, short grub and cattle rustlers were constant menaces. Day and night riding by the cowboys alone saved the herds, and when the grub wagon and cook strayed, the crew of white and Negro riders had to go hungry for a day or two. Siringo and Gabe, out hunting for lost steers, found an ear of yellow corn which they parched in hot coals and ate with wild meat broiled over a little fire, Gabe declaring God had dropped that ear of corn for their special benefit.

Checked by floods in the Cimarron and Wild Horse rivers, the riders stayed with the herd, rode with it on the frequent stampedes, searched out in the pouring rains for lost steers, built fires and wrapped themselves in wet blankets where night overtook them. And when soldiers protecting the Indian lands from sooners, claimants, and nesters told hungry riders they could have all the grub wanted if they'd come across the Black Horse torrent, Siringo swam his horse across, obtained a wash tub of bacon, flour, coffee, sugar and salt and floated it back to the hungry Grimes crew. Then the tub was floated over to the soldiers on a crossing current.

Grimes, the owner of the herd, came around by railroad, and the herd was broken up into three 800-head bunches, waiting for them to fill their huge salt-grass paunches with rich strong Kansas grass, thereby fattening themselves.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

When the feeders were fit the steers were sold and shipped. Some of the cowboys had already gone back to Texas by train or overland on horses. Siringo drew his time, bathed shaved and had his hair cut, and romped around Wichita, showing off with other riders to the 2500 population. And having drunk in Rowdy Joe's, favorite joint of the south Texas riders, they shot up the town. Then Siringo and a companion dashed onto the tollbridge spanning the Arkansas river, heading back thirty-five miles to the Grimes camp. They mocked the one-legged tollgate man who opened on them with a double-barreled shotgun by the time they were half way across. A shot hit Siringo's left leg, scarring it for life.

Having spent his money, Siringo looked the region over. The summer turned into autumn and work was hard to find. Welcome to table and bunks, nevertheless he found himself with only a month's work, helping move the Johnson herd down into the Indian Nations where they would winter. "I suffered greatly," Siringo remarks, when he rode night herd in summer clothes while a winter blizzard blew, no overshoes and no overcoat! The job worked out, he went trapping, living in a dugout till a steer coming down the slope broke through the roof, pinning him fast.

Then I swore off trapping, leaving my pelts behind. I started for Kiowa, Kansas, next morning, and the raging blizzard became so cold I headed for a warm climate.

Now my route lay down the Cimarron river through sand hills and blackjack timber. During the all-day ride many deer and turkey were seen, but I was afraid of attracting Indians, there being fresh moccasin tracks everywhere.

Early the next morning while absent from my camp-fire to get a cup of snow to be melted for drinking water, the tall grass around my camp caught fire. I had a swift job on my hands to save Whiskey Pete and my saddle. My leather leggings and slicker were burned to a crisp. Only a small piece of saddle blanket was saved.

(To be continued)

BIG TOP BUCKAROO

(Continued from page 114)

diction became thunderous reality. Suddenly rolling black masses of clouds blotted out the sun, grinding their way across that searing sky. With the swiftness of a striking rattlesnake, the storm hit, a hammering, deafening deluge, drenching men and wagons.

"Roll away to high ground!" Milloy bawled desperately back along the train.

Horses strained at tugs. Men shouted. Wheels sank deeper into dust that had abruptly turned to ooze. Milloy lashed at his team. It gave one violent lunge and that was all. With surprising calm Milloy scrambled down, waded through mire, checked his half-buried wagons. Strangely, while all this went on, Eddie sat tense, and did nothing.

This was it! The break that always came, sooner or later, when Eddie was sent out on a job! Helpless as it was, Tav Milloy's Greater Tent Shows was ripe for a visit by Thraikill.

There was only one thing to do—and Eddie did it. He slid down and sloshed among wagons hub-deep in water and mud, filling his mind with a picture. Before full darkness set in, he'd tucked away every detail so he could reconstruct that picture for Thraikill. Beneath the driving rain, roughnecks unloaded. Tents sprang up. Planks were laid. The animal cages were rolled under one big tent. Bunks were moved from wagons, Milloy's among them, and placed under canvas. That last, Eddie thought, was a stroke of luck.

He was thinking about Tav Milloy as he saddled Pal unnoticed and headed reluctantly into the night. Maybe, before Eddie got back, Milloy would notice his absence, but Eddie would have to chance that.

He might as well have been sightless this rain-battered night, but he knew if he pointed due west, he would run into the Bullblood Hills. There he could get his bearings and find the rough canyon that

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

would bring him to the old goatsherd's shack. It was easy.

The miles crawled past. Slow, crushing, maddening miles.

Why didn't he just turn back? Even as he thought the question he knew the answer—you didn't turn back on Forest Thrailkill. Not and live, you didn't. He was in too deep for turning. But it had been a bright dream. Eddie Cayou, wild-animal trainer, his picture on the gaudy signs the tack-spitters put up on the route head.

Rain-drenched, Eddie crawled painfully off his horse. "It's me—Eddie," he mumbled, at the muffled question from within the shack. He pushed inside.

Lamplight smote him, but he glimpsed the towering figure of Forest Thrailkill in the center of the room.

"Eddie," Thrailkill's tone was sharp. "I'd about given you up."

Eddie stared, muck dripping from his clothes, feeling the strength in Thrailkill. Like battering your bruised fists against a granite column.

"Well?" There was anger in the face. "Spill it!"

Eddie's nose twitched. Then, haltingly, prodded by Thrailkill's impatient questions, he painted the picture. "Halfway between Samtown and Big Bench. Lonesome country. They'll be stuck in that black goo for a week. The treasury wagon'll be locked, but there's a coupla loose floorboards, right-hand side. Box'll be in the front right-hand corner. Nobody around, Milloy's sleepin' in a tent."

Thrailkill's eyes were wolfish. "Tomorrow—at two in the morning," he decided rapidly. "Damned good job, after all, kid. Couldn't had a better savvy of the layout if I'd been there myself. Now I know where every wagon, every tent is, and it'll be easy. Smart figgerin', from the circus poster in Cragcrest to this."

"There are willows down by the creek

BIG TOP BUCKAROO

where you can leave your horse, a hundred yards south of the animal tent," Eddie said dully.

"Usin' your thinker," Thrailkill grunted. "We'll meet here after it's over. Better be slopin' now, kid, before you're missed."

Eddie edged toward the door. "I'll tell Tav Pal run off and I had to hunt him."

Eddie tried not to think as he rode back. He tried to make his brain a black emptiness like the rain-drenched prairie night about him.

The rain slackened by swirling degrees, and then stopped altogether. It was breaking dawn when he reached the mud flat, just as the cook bellowed, "Flag's up!" Eddie slipped into the mess tent with the sweating, laughing roughnecks. Bacon and hot cakes were put before him, but after a few listless nibbles he shoved the plate aside. He couldn't eat Tav Milloy's food.

He got up and came face to face with Milloy.

Milloy, just entering the tent, halted. He seemed to be waiting for Eddie to say something. Did he know about Eddie's disappearance?

"My boy, I've a new job for you," Milloy said. "Certain duties to perform among our wild captives, and maybe more to your calling."

A new job? What did it matter? Eddie trudged to the animal tent. In a few minutes, following instructions from the attendant in charge, he was cleaning out cages, putting in fresh straw. This was a start right down at bedrock towards being an animal trainer. The start and the finish.

IT WAS the earth-shaking roar that caused Eddie to lose his forkful of straw and whirl, hand stabbing for the gun in his shirt. He riveted shocked eyes on the maker of that roar, and slowly dropped his hand. It was a big cat bellowing anger at Eddie, claws vicious against the bars of his cage.



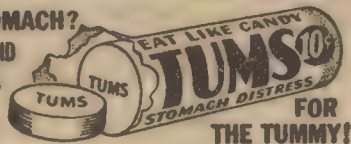
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

The attendant chuckled. "Don't pay him no mind, son. That's Ulysses, the king lion. Your a newcomer, so he don't like you. He'll get used to you."

Eddie nodded, hardly listening. Impulse willed him forward. That, and fascination for a pair of tawny eyes. In the face of this rage, of this slaving death, he came closer. Ulysses stood in sudden, watchful silence. Here was a newcomer he couldn't bluff. He dropped back from the bars, took up a motionless stance in the middle of his cage. Eddie kept advancing, slowly. Then he lifted a latch, and the cage was open. Ulysses tensed, and then edged back in baffled respect.

Eddie dropped the latch. The attendant was coming alive. "Jumpin' Judas!" he gasped. "You called his bluff! Kid, you mighta been killed."

"Got to know how to handle 'em," Eddie shrugged it off. But inside him was white-hot exultation. It had been with Ulysses as with Rudolph, the rattlesnake, and Charley, the bobcat. Some can, and some can't, Tav Milloy had said. Well, Eddie Canyon, you're one that can, and have! Then Tav Milloy was running towards him. Eddie could see fire in the old man's eye.

"Cayou! Who gave you permission to open that cage?"

There was an instant of stiff silence. "Nobody," Eddie stated shortly. "I just had to see for myself."

"Oh, did you?" Milloy's voice was cold steel. "Get this, Eddie. Nobody lifts a latch on a cage until I say he's ready!"

Eddie turned and picked up his straw fork. . . .

It was two o'clock in the morning. Forrest Thraikill would be pulling up now in the willows. His soul raw with indecision, Eddie stopped his harried pacing of the loose planks inside the animal tent. He ran a hand across his forehead and brought away beads of sweat. He touched

BIG TOP BUCKAROO

the bulge of his gun, and cursed as he dropped his hand.

Bated hush held the camp; a dim slice of moon and the narrowed scrutiny of the stars allowed for vague shapes. Silence everywhere, but thunder inside Eddie.

Out there a plank creaked. Eddie stiffened. Resolve swept him, abruptly, probably too late. He stepped outside.

There was Forset Thraikill, with the black box under his left arm, gun in his right hand. Eddie slid his own Colt from beneath his shirt. When Thraikill was directly in front of him, Eddie strode forward.

"Drop that box and that gun!"

Thraikill stopped short. He didn't turn. He didn't drop anything.

"Drop 'em, or I'll let you have it!" Eddie called, desperate.

Thraikill turned slowly.

"What's the matter, kid?" he asked quietly, mockingly. "Gone soft?" He took a step toward Eddie. "Or you figure to grab the whole take for yourself? I'm disappointed in you, kid."

The soft, persuasive words beat upon Eddie and forced his wavering gun downward. And then he sensed, the rip of an oath and the flame and blast of a triggered gun. Something smashed a hole in Eddie, drove him staggering backwards, thudding to plank flooring.

Thraikill fired at the sound again and again. Yells rose in the night, far away. Eddie crept along the planking inch by inch, mercifully numb to pain.

His head rammed painfully against something. With infinite labor his leaden arms dragged him upright. Dimly he was aware of uproar about him.

The cat cages! A groan of lost hope burst from Eddie's throat. Gasping, fighting off nausea, Eddie reached up and the latch lifted. The door opened, and Eddie saw the slashing beast go over him, heard Thraikill's terror-filled scream, the futile,

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

panic-wild shot he hurled at the already maddened animal. Eddie was fast sinking into a soft velvety blackness.

Eddie came to in erratic, groggy movement. He blinked his eyes to probe the fogged surroundings. Slowly he realized that he was on the bunk in the treasury wagon. Eddie strove to sit up. Then he heard a gruffish snort.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world. There was old Tav, his sleeves rolled up to meaty elbows, and Eddie saw a pan of water, medicines, discarded bandages. Milloy spoke to him.

"You are a fighter, Eddie Cayou. In the end, you fought the clean fight. We shall not look back."

Eddie blinked. How much had shrewd old Tav guessed from the start? Guessed, and risked, to save a boy? "I can stay with the circus, then?"

"By the gods," Milloy growled, "try to get away! Destiny has decreed that your name shall be painted in red and gold letters across the face of the globe. Yes, indeed. Eddie Cayou, the world's greatest wild-animal trainer. But under my tutoring," he warned; "no more opening of cages unless I say so."

"But the law," Eddie ventured. "Some-day it'll catch up with me. I done all Thraikill's advance work."

"Eddie, you will gamble on the law," Milloy decided fiercely. "Yes, indeed. You will speak your potent piece before the bar of justice. You shall have witnesses, dozens of them. Old Tav and his happy family will be there, backing you to the limit. And after that night's heroism is given its just due, your checkered past will be sponged from the slate. You will have the freedom of eagles."

Eddie closed his eyes, knowing contentment suddenly. He'd have to sweat, and work, and fight. But he'd do it. This strange, roving home would be his for as long as he lived.

THREE HOMBRES FROM HADES

(Continued from page 108)

on the sole of his boots?" he demanded.

They waited.

"Did you ever take a look at Jay's brand? The Circle Star, made with two irons. Couldn't that have been the foot-prints you saw, with just the star part of Jay's brand?"

The trio stood motionless for a second, then the Tracys turned slowly and looked at Jay.

Jay Larson was scornful. "You can look at these boots if you want to. You won't find any star on them."

The brothers' faces didn't tell what they were thinking.

After a while Sam spoke softly. "Those are new boots, aren't they, Jay? It couldn't be that you killed Roy for the money and tried to make it look like Jody did it, could it, Jay?"

Jay Larson's face drained white. "Sam, you're crazy!"

Sam nodded slowly and Bat spoke up. "It couldn't be that you wanted to get rid of Jody last night before he started to thinking too much, could it, Jay?"

"You're crazy, both of you!" Jay Larson blustered. That nervous little tic was beginning to jerk at the corner of his left eye. "We trail this killer for almost a year, and now that we've got him cold you're letting him try to talk you out of it."

Sam's beard parted in a humorless grin. Bat's face showed nothing. His gun hand reached up for the tobacco in his shirt pocket.

But at the first move of that hand Jay Larson jumped back and a .45 flashed in his hand.

A crash of the .45 jarred the stable. Larson shouldn't have jumped, it ruined his aim and he missed and had to cock his gun again. By that time Bat Tracy's own .45 roared.

Bat didn't miss. One time was enough.

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He didn't even bother to pull the hammer back again. The bullet slammed Larson back. He staggered once crazily and then fell twisted on the ground. He was dead before he hit.

From somewhere Sam's soft voice said, "In the gut, the way Roy got it." Then there was silence. There didn't seem to be a sound in the world. Not even the wind whispered.

After a long time Bat Tracy said, "A man can be wrong; sometimes a man can be awful wrong." A whole year of hunting and unrest showed in his face. It was suddenly an old face, and very tired. He slipped the gun quietly back into its holster.

The old liveryman appeared from somewhere and gimp-legged it up to where they were. "I seen it," he yelped. "Every blamed bit of it. The big one drew first."

He glowered at the dead Larson, and spat on the ground.

"You may have to tell the marshal about it, pop," Sam Tracy said. "There'll be questions."

The old man nodded. Jody wiped his face on his sleeve and it was wet. Cold and wet. He needed to sit down but there wasn't any place. He needed to talk to somebody but there wasn't anything to say.

Sam Tracy turned to Bat. "We'd better see about the marshal, I guess." They started for the door, then Sam hesitated for just an instant. "Jody, your spread hasn't run down too much. If you want to go back to it there won't be anybody to bother you."

That was all. He seemed to think about saying something else but he decided against it. Jody watched them as they marched out, Sam on the right and Bat on the left.

The little liveryman was hobbling along in the middle.

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